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"I've never had a hard-boiled egg before."

Marco Vittur. Cover: © 2025 Disney Enterprises, Inc. All Rights Reserved

WELCOME

ONE DAY IN 1981, the power in Burbank, Los Angeles, abruptly went out. The source of the brownout was a mystery, until the electric company traced the surge to an address on South Buena Vista Street. It was Walt Disney Studios — specifically the soundstage where a movie titled *Tron* was being assembled. And so peculiar was the way this story was being brought to life, with vast amounts of lighting flooding the sets to aid a newfangled digital process, that it temporarily darkened large swathes of a city.

"This sounds really far out," Jeff Bridges, the star of *Tron*, had told its director, Steven Lisberger, when first pitched the project. He was not wrong. The results pushed cinema to its limits, imagining a visually sensational, strikingly original world set inside a computer, featuring characters who fling magic Frisbees and race phosphorescent bikes. Lasers, neon, philosophy... though it wasn't a huge hit at the time, *Tron* lingered. It had arrived future-proofed.

And now it's back. In our uneasy age of AI and rogue tech-lords, *Tron* is timelier than ever. The present has caught up with the past. And following 2010's *Tron: Legacy*, new instalment *Ares* has some brand-new moves, unleashing an army of sentient malware onto the streets of the real world, Light Cycles and all. In our epic cover story, Alex Godfrey braves the Vancouver set, and gets the lowdown from Bridges, Lisberger, new director Joachim Rønning and many more — including the mighty Nine Inch Nails, replacing Daft Punk on scoring duties — on

what to expect from this latest trip to the Grid.

And because this month we are all about the cool glowy stuff, we've created our first-ever light-up cover, a *Tron* exclusive available at select retailers across the UK. Just push a button: the Light Cycle goes THHHHTTTTH (not actual sound) and blazes with red light. Far out? Hell, yes.

Enjoy the issue.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Julien Rico Jr
French poster artist and illustrator Julien is known for his striking minimalist artwork, making him a perfect fit for the future-shock world of *Tron: Ares* — here focusing on a stunning rendition of the iconic Light Cycle.

TURN TO PAGE 30 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION*

* Please note that your first issue may not be the cover displayed

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EMPIRE

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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

ALEX GODFREY WENT ON SET OF *TRON: ARES*

"'I kept dreaming of a world I thought I'd never see,' said Kevin Flynn about the Grid, in *Tron: Legacy*. 'And then one day… I got in!' Well… so did I! And, up-close and personal with Light Cycles and Identity Discs, it was very cool indeed. Unlike me, as you can see. But such is life."

IANA MURRAY HITCHED UP WITH THE *MATERIALISTS* CAST

"Sitting down with three of the biggest stars on the planet could easily have been nerve-wracking, but Dakota, Chris and Pedro were a delightful, generous and hilarious trio. By the end of our conversation, they were all snuggled up on the sofa, holding hands. Adorable!"

AL HORNER INTERVIEWED MIKE FLANAGAN AND TOM HIDDLESTON

"My Saturday nights aren't usually spent talking about the apocalypse and Alan Carr. Then again, Mike Flanagan and Tom Hiddleston aren't your usual interviewees. The pair were on brilliantly philosophical form for our universe-spanning chat. Who needs Wetherspoons?"

Getty Images. Spinelines issue 442: Newsstand: "There's always a way. But the first step: defend the fuel" is from *Mad Max 2*. Subs: "Watch the first step!" "Surf's up!" is from *Batman & Robin*

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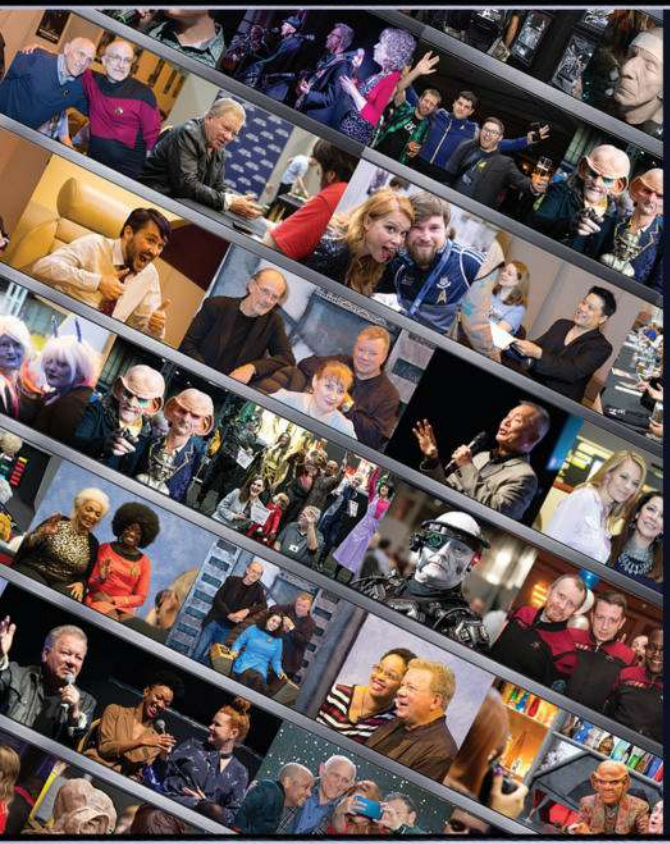

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EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

POP QUIZ, HOTSHOT

I've been a subscriber to *Empire* since around 2005 and have seen many features come and go (hello, 'Listen To Your Friend Billy Zane'), but I am truly a massive fan of the monthly quiz (much to my wife's annoyance). Every month when *Empire* arrives on the doorstep, the first thing I do is get my wife to quiz me. (Who said romance is dead?) Proudest moment was getting 18 out of 20 on The Muppets (including all members of the Electric Mayhem)! And who knew that I know more about Julia Roberts than I do Peter Jackson? Certainly not me!

JONNY MOORE, VIA EMAIL

Thanks for your kind words — and special thanks/apologies to Mrs Moore. To keep your quizzing skills sharp, have a Picturehouse membership on us.

Picturehouse

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KICK UP YOUR HEELS

Just seen *Ballerina*. Ana de Armas did everything Keanu did, except flashbacked and in heels.

SIMON BAKER, LANCASTER

Is it too late to put "flashbacked and in heels" on the poster?

SHARK HAIL

Films involving sharks — harking back to *Jaws*, the 50th anniversary of which was celebrated in the June issue (#440) — are often unrealistic. However, the end of this film is confoundingly feasible. As the boat sinks, Brody fires a bullet into a compressed air cylinder in the shark's maw. The cylinder explodes, killing the shark. A back-of-the-envelope calculation reveals that the energy released from an exploding 12-litre tank, pressurised to 230 bar, would be enough to catapult the average person over the Empire State Building.

DR. MIKE FOLLOWS, CPHYS

Is it too late to put "confoundingly feasible" on the poster?

IN MEMORIAM

BARRY McILHENEY

1960 – 2025

WITH HUGE SHOCK and sadness, we learned this month that the great Barry McIlheney had passed away in his sleep, at the age of 65. A titan of the magazine publishing industry — he steered *Smash Hits* to glory and launched *heat* in 1999, among many other feats — he was also instrumental in creating the magazine you are holding in your hands right now, as the very first editor of *Empire*.

Born in Belfast, Barry became a librarian there at an early age, devouring books and especially magazines ("My ideal day would be for nobody to come in," he admitted in 2020). After moving to London, he quickly became a dynamo in the world of publishing, editing *Smash Hits* in the late '80s: under his aegis, the magazine would sell a million copies per issue in 1989.

That was the year when *Empire* was born, and with Barry guiding its launch, it came fully formed as an informative, inventive and, crucially, *fun* read. In his Issue 1 editor's letter, he shared some of his favourite movie moments. His dad taking him, aged ten, to see *Midnight Cowboy* "because he loved Westerns". A toilet joke from *Carry On Spying*. The helicopters emerging from the rising sun in *Apocalypse Now*. "Those are the sort of things *Empire* will be looking out for, and that should tell you more about this new magazine than any amount of waffling about Art and subtexts could ever do," he explained.

That lack of snobbishness and feeling that joy can come from any part of cinema — whether it involves Francis Ford Coppola or Sid James — set the template for *Empire*. And the fact we're still going 36 years on is testament to the strength of that vision, and the humour and energy that came baked into *Empire*'s DNA.

We salute you, Barry. Thank you for everything.

NICK DE SEMLYEN, EDITOR

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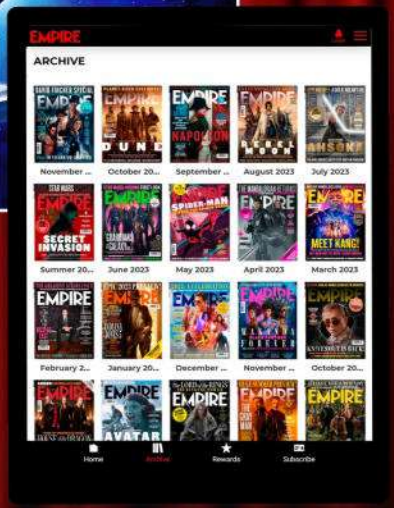

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

AUGUST 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

Get ready to root for an alien killer

THE FILMMAKER BEHIND PREDATOR: BADLANDS ON TAKING THE INTERGALACTIC BOUNTY HUNTER INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

BEFORE DAN TRACHTENBERG entered the picture, the *Predator* franchise tended to adhere to a straightforward formula. Over three decades and four films (six including the *Alien Vs. Predator* outings), the routine was almost always the same: dreadlocked alien(s) cause mayhem in the present (or near-present)-day, before ultimately having their arse(s) handed to them by a group of musclebound, mostly male humans.

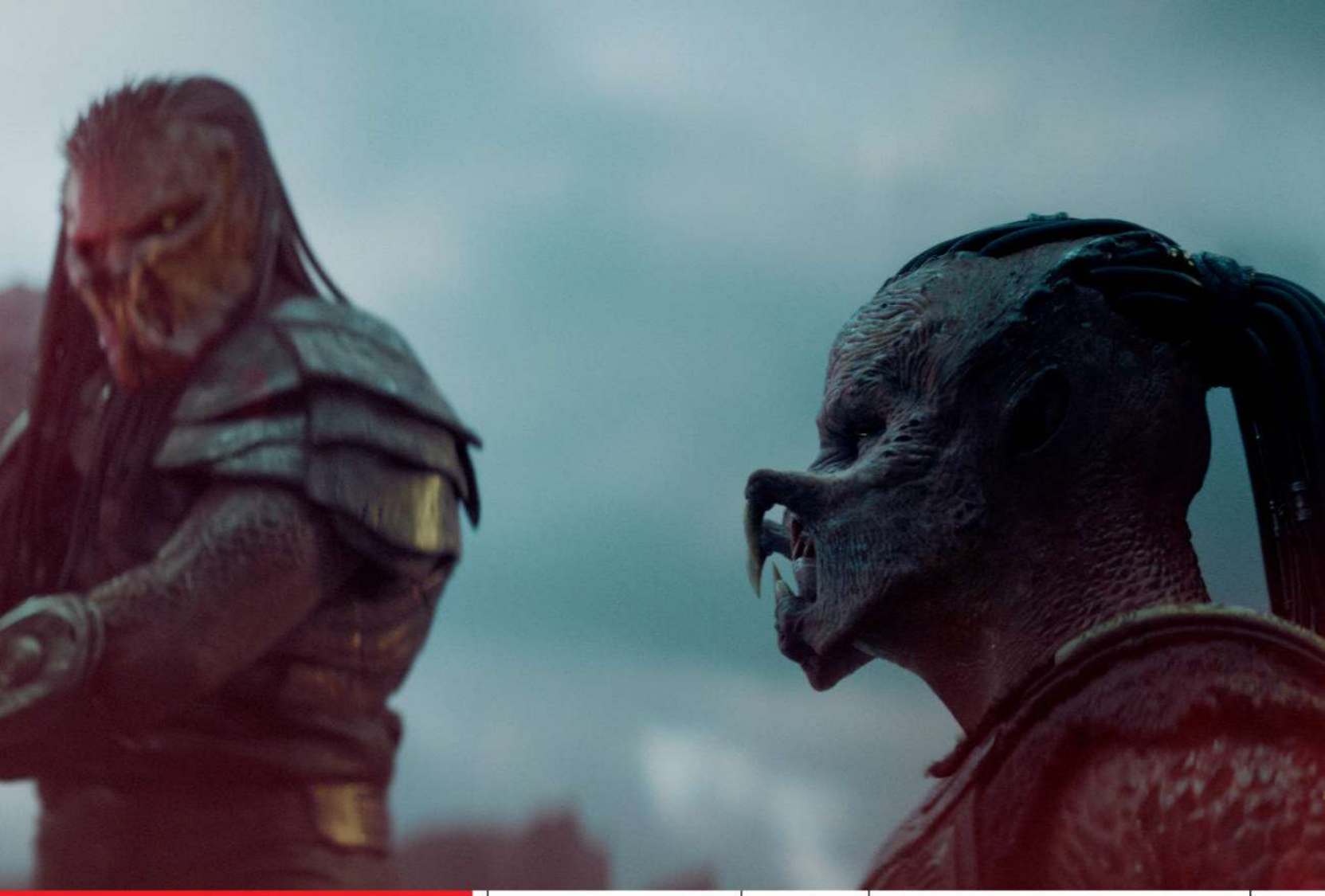
That all changed with *Prey*. Trachtenberg's superb 2022 actioner wound the Predator universe way back to the early 18th century, tracking a young Comanche woman as she defended her tribe from a brutal extra-terrestrial hunter. And this year sees Trachtenberg pushing the dreadlocked-alien envelope even further, with *two* new *Predator* films — the first of which (*Killer Of Killers*) is an animated anthology spanning the Viking era, feudal Japan and World War II, while the second (*Badlands*) is a far-future-set adventure in which the Predator is... the *hero*.

"It does feel like a thrill ride to be able to make these thrill rides," the director says, of being given the keys to the *Predator* kingdom. "Since *Prey*, it's been, 'Okay... what else can we do?' Going to these different genres and periods has been challenging, but that challenge forces you to be creative and — hopefully — breeds better material." *Predator: Killer Of Killers* landed on Disney+ last month, and is, Trachtenberg says, an "extremely gore-filled" exercise in pitting the iconic alien against history's most fearsome warriors: "People may have expected [*samurais*] and Vikings, but the Second World War story will really have them going, 'Oh. My. Gosh.' That's not a period that's been utilised in this kind of story before."

The biggest swing so far, though, Trachtenberg admits, is *Predator: Badlands*. Arriving this November, the film is set in the future on the creatures' home planet, Yautja Prime, and sees us rooting for a "runt of the litter" Predator named Dek. Outcast from his clan, which includes his father, Dek must navigate a perilous path to redemption. Says Trachtenberg: "That feels like a big idea, not just within *Predator*, but in sci-fi generally. In most sci-fi universes, the 'creatures' are either bad guys or sidekicks. In [*Badlands*] it's: 'What if you were *with* the creature on this crazy mission to prove itself, seeing everything through its eyes?'"

Trachtenberg likens Dek (played by Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi) to Conan The Barbarian or Mad Max — "He's a thing of few words, pretty blunt. He cuts straight to the point. Literally and figuratively." The few words Dek does speak will be in his native Yautja language, painstakingly developed for the film. "I am *not* fluent in Yautja," Trachtenberg confirms. "I have a hard time with the rolling 'R's in Spanish. Yautja uses rolling *tonsils*."

Alongside Dek on his blood-soaked voyage is Elle Fanning, playing *two* characters — one Trachtenberg is keeping schtum about, the other is Thia, a lifelike robot 'synth'



Above: Daddy Predator (Reuben de Jong) and son Dek (Dimitrius Schuster-Koloamatangi) fail to see eye to eye. **Left:** Elle Fanning plays two roles — here as synth Thia. **Below, left to right:** Director Dan Trachtenberg on set; Dek in peril (where's Ant when you need him?).

manufactured by Weyland-Yutani, the tech conglomerate featured in the *Alien* movies. Trachtenberg is remaining tight-lipped on whether any other elements from the *Alien* universe will pop up in the film, but reveals the decision to use Weyland-Yutani came very early on in *Badlands*' timeline. "I always wanted no humans in this movie, so I thought it might be fun to have the Predator with a robot. And then I thought, 'I know a company that makes robots...'" Thia and Dek make for a "fun, mismatched pairing", the director grins. "One talkative, one laconic. As exciting and violent as this movie is, the character stuff really pops, too."

The question is, having already shaken up time periods, locations and traditional hero/villain dynamics, where on Earth (or elsewhere) might Trachtenberg go with this franchise next? Might he even be open to collaborating with *Alien: Romulus* director Fede Alvarez, as Alvarez himself has suggested, on an *Alien Vs. Predator* movie, one that might actually be good? "After *Prey*, I had three ideas," Trachtenberg teases. "One was *Killer Of Killers*, one was *Badlands* and one... I haven't done yet. So, there are other awesome ideas and time periods it'd be exciting to explore, and all that's been part of our discussion for [what's next]."

The Predator's not putting down his shoulder cannon yet.

***PREDATOR: BADLANDS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 7 NOVEMBER**

Top to bottom: Anna (Lindsay Lohan) still knows how to shred; Freaky family: Harper (Julia Butters), Anna, Tess (Jamie Lee Curtis) and Lily (Sophia Hammons); On set with director Nisha Ganatra.

Let's switch again

LINDSAY LOHAN ON RETURNING AFTER 22 YEARS FOR BODY-SWAP SEQUEL FREAKIER FRIDAY

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

LINDSAY LOHAN WAS just 17 when she made *Freaky Friday*, a 2003 intergenerational comedy that sits firmly in the canon of classic teen movies. As Anna, she played one half of a bickering mother-daughter duo, who swapped bodies with Jamie Lee Curtis' Tess. Now she returns with the shoe on the other foot, as Anna switches with her own teen daughter Harper (Julia Butters), with Curtis also cooked into the chaos. Lohan tells *Empire* about putting her personal spin on *Freakier Friday*'s topsy-turvy world.

JLC THE MVP

After both Lohan and Curtis were repeatedly asked about a *Freaky Friday* sequel in interviews, the latter called up Disney CEO Bob Iger and Lohan directly to gauge their interest. "She said, 'What do you think, if we do 'Freaky Friday 2'?'" Lohan recalls. "I was like, 'I'm in, it just has to be the right script.' That was the big thing for both of us. We wanted it to live up to all the expectations." The stars remained friends over the years, so delighted in being back on set together — though in terms of who's mothering who, it sounds like there was a role-reversal. "Between takes, I would make Jamie do wall sits," Lohan laughs. "She'd be like, 'Are we really doing this right now?', and I'm like, 'Yes, it's good for us.'" Tess would be proud.

A MOTHER'S INTUITION

With *Freakier Friday*, we see the often-complicated relationship between girls and their mothers extended across three generations. "Anna's a mom now, raising a teenager, and the dynamic there is ever-changing," Lohan says. "You also have Tess, who is still kind of overbearing — and it's another merging of two families (*as Anna prepares to marry fiancé Eric, played by Manny Jacinto*)." Becoming a mother herself back in 2023 provided some real-life insight for Lohan. "The whole world looks different," the actor says. "Everything is about your child. But we have to remember to make time for ourselves too, live our lives, fulfill our dreams. Moms are always trying to juggle it all, and that's what Anna's going through in this."

SHREDDING FRETBOARDS

Though much has changed for Anna in 20 years, one thing is the same, according to Lohan: "That punk Anna, she's still there." Her garage band

Top to bottom: Anna and Tess may regret fiddling with fate; History repeats itself as Anna swaps bodies with teen daughter Harper.

Pink Slip (and their powerhouse tunes) were a fan-favourite from the first film, with Lohan learning to play guitar for the role. Picking the axe back up filled the star with nostalgia. "The second I started with my guitar coach again, it was like we never left," she recalls. "It was the same guitar, everything. It was like it was yesterday." The most challenging musical aspect this time around was nailing Anna's big solo. "We made it more difficult for this one," Lohan says. "I'm such a perfectionist; we rehearsed a lot."

FULLY LOHAN

Lohan has been in the movie business a long time — she was just 12 when she broke out in another switch-up caper, *The Parent Trap*. With *Freakier Friday*, she decided to put all of her industry experience in the years following to use as an executive producer. "It really came from the movies I was doing with Netflix," she says, referring to her return to acting via a three-picture deal with the streamer, including 2022's *Falling For Christmas* and 2024's *Irish Wish*. "I was like, 'I know this.' When I'm reading the script, I'm already visualising where it's going to be, what the character's wearing." That more holistic approach fed into *Freakier Friday*, with Lohan having input into the story after thinking about what Anna's been up to all these years. "[That journey] was a big part of what the new script was going to be," she says. "I like to be fully involved in the projects I do now, from the ground up. I really enjoy sharing my knowledge I've acquired over all these years in the industry, and don't want to let that go to waste. That's a big part of who I am as an actor now." As Pink Slip would sing: she's it, she's the ultimate.

***FREAKIER FRIDAY* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 AUGUST**

Marco Vittur. #1 Marvel and DC cover by Greg Capullo

THE PLATFORM

"Why not have Rocket riding into battle on Krypto, Superman's very good dog?"

HELEN O'HARA ON HOW MARVEL AND DC'S LATEST COMIC CROSSOVER COULD LEAD TO A SUPERHERO-MOVIE MASH-UP

A MOMENTOUS CROSSOVER is coming... to comics. Ancient rivals Marvel Comics and DC are teaming up two of their best-loved characters for their first crossover in 21 years, since *JLA/Avengers* wrapped up in 2004. *Deadpool/Batman* #1 will emerge in September with *Batman/Deadpool* #1 due in November. The Merc With The Mouth versus the Dark Knight! It's a tasty prospect, but could something similar happen on screen?

Well, maybe. Marvel worked successfully with Sony on the *Spider-Man* films to crowd-pleasing effect, huge box-office results, and zero unresolved lawsuits. Personnel-wise, there are also bridges to be built. James Gunn of course worked for Marvel across three successful *Guardians Of The Galaxy* films (and a holiday special) before becoming head of DC Studios in 2022. He has clear affection for both universes, and even teased to *Empire* that he'd like to work with his *Guardians* cast again, "probably at my other job". Okay, he most likely meant casting his actors in new roles rather than porting over their characters, but why not both? Why not have his beloved Rocket riding into battle on Krypto, Superman's very good dog?

Without wishing to be crassly commercial, a film crossover could make a mint. Think about it: Deadpool's two solo films each made a very respectable $780 million-odd. But his intra-Marvel crossover of *Deadpool & Wolverine* grossed a cool $1.33 billion, because people were intrigued by the team-up. Similarly, *Batman V Superman: Dawn Of Justice* made around $200 million more than *Man Of Steel*. 'Batman V Deadpool' onscreen? That could challenge *Titanic*.

People love 'who would win in a fight' stories. It could also bring back the excitement people felt for the first *Avengers*, or when Hulk turned up in *Thor: Ragnarok* or Wonder Woman in *BvS*. If you've exhausted the big names of your own comics universe, here's a chance to bring over the best and brightest from the other one, and see everyone with fresh eyes.

Of course, the crossover can be overused and its appeal diminished; that's arguably what happened in the comics after a rash of 1990s crossovers. Too many of these stories end in stalemates that feel contractually mandated by their publishers' respective lawyers rather than dictated by the story. But as both companies struggle to break out as they once did, this could be just the thing to excite the world. Think of the possibilities: Wonder Woman on the razz with Thor. Cyborg and Vision comparing operating systems. Captain Marvel and Shazam, locked in a trademark dispute. It could be all the fun of comics, on a bigger scale than ever before.

Trailer Talk

Eddington

UNFILTERED, UNCENSORED, UNCOMPROMISING TRAILER REACTIONS FROM TEAM *EMPIRE*

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Alex Godfrey (Features Editor): I feel like Ari Aster came out of nowhere and really scared and excited people with *Hereditary*. Then they loved *Midsommar*, which is a different kind of horror movie.

Harry Stainer (Social Media Editor): It's the best break-up movie.

Alex: Exactly. With *Beau Is Afraid* and now *Eddington* he's launched into a new phase. I feel like he was never going to be a straight-up horror guy. He's just a fucking weirdo.

Joanna Moran (Director Of Photography): I'm excited about this one because I don't like horror films. So I can appreciate what you guys love about Ari Aster without needing years of therapy.

Ben Travis (Deputy Online Editor): With *Beau Is Afraid* there was something really anxious and true and weird to it. Him applying that approach to a real-life situation — Covid and the pandemic — that we're still wrestling with is really interesting. It's a big swing. [1]

Harry: Yeah, I'm quite looking forward to seeing the first major retrospective pandemic film.

Beth Webb (News Editor): It feels too fresh and recent and our brains are still catching up with what happened. So to be plunged back into it means that I'm slightly dreading this. It's all very triggering.

Alex: Ari Aster would love to hear this. He loves to trigger stuff in people's brains.

Ben: I do wonder if the "too soon"-ness is part of the point. Rather than having a clearer vantage point further in the future, it gives you a raw and messy deconstruction of something that is still so recent.

Beth: I just can't watch anything with nasal swabs. I'd rather watch the scene in *Midsommar* where that couple plummets off a cliff to their deaths again than watch anything like that.

John Nugent (Reviews Editor): I have such horrible memories of those. It's worse when someone else is doing it to you, and you can feel the swab jabbing the inside of your brain.

Ben: Oh my God, it's the Joker facing off against Mr Fantastic! [2]

Joanna: So it seems that Pedro is playing the more liberal politician and Joaquin is more conservative. He does seem quite sympathetic though, at least early on in the trailer.

Beth: He seems quite oafish.

Joanna: Pedro can pull off a gilet though, even if it's not the vest that he wore on the red carpet at Cannes.

John: It's very 'dad fashion'. It's worth mentioning at this point that this is a kind of Western. Not in the traditional sense; in a more modern and satirical way.

Ben: Joaquin Phoenix is having a yee-haw summer.

Beth: ... is he?

Ben: Well, he is in this. Maybe we should all have a yee-haw summer.

John: Emma Stone is wearing quite a nice vintage jumper. [3]

Alex: John's doing fashion commentary like that guy on *Lorraine*.

John: The daytime TV show *Lorraine*?

Alex: Yeah, that guy Mark who comes out with a load of models and talks about blouses.

Beth: Do you not know Mark, John?

Harry: Yes, we all clearly love *Lorraine*.

Ben: I bet Lorraine's having a yee-haw summer.

Beth: Great to see Micheal Ward in something like this. He was incredible in *Small Axe*. [4]

John: A Black Lives Matter protest with a Black law enforcement officer is real tinder-box stuff.

Ben: This may be the part of the film that's making me feel a bit nervous. Should Ari Aster be the person to be making this? Is *this* too soon?

John: I think you're right to be nervous, but my interpretation is that he's poking fun at white liberals as much as he is white conservatives. You would hope he finds the nuance there, rather than painting with too broad a brush.

Alex: I don't think he would ever speak on behalf of anyone else. He hasn't got an ego like that.

Beth: They say that acting is just reacting, and I've got to say that's some top-tier blinking from Joaquin between slaps from Pedro. [5]

John: There's nothing like some feeble scrapping between two really awkward men.

Joanna: Awkward men scrapping is my kink.

Beth: Jo hits replay and pours a big wine.

Alex: Joaquin here reminds me of John C. Reilly in *Magnolia*. He's a broken, sensitive, insecure man with authority and is overcompensating in awkward ways.

Ben: Austin Butler's more *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood* Butler here rather than (*adopts Elvis accent*), "Mama, they've got us in the pandemic, mama." [6]

Beth: I would say that he's having a yee-haw summer in this get-up.

Ben: Okay, so it turns out that yee-haw summer is definitely going to be a thing.

Harry: We all have to come into the office wearing 'yee-haw summer' cowboy hats.

Joanna: But what colour? We need our version of "brat green".

Beth: It has to be *Empire* red.

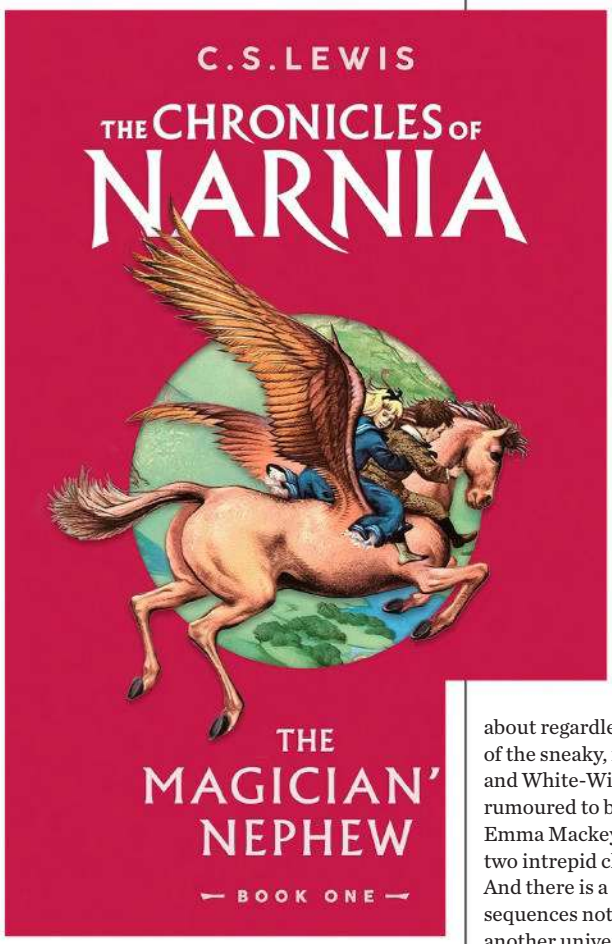
Ben: What have I created?

***EDDINGTON* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 22 AUGUST**

Alamy, Imago

THE LION, THE WITCH AND NO WARDROBE

GRETA GERWIG'S FIRST FORAY INTO NARNIA LOOKS SET TO BE AN AS-YET-UNADAPTED TALE, THE MAGICIAN'S NEPHEW



ARMOIRE AFICIONADOS AND closet connoisseurs: prepare for heartbreak. The rest of us: prepare for a movie that will take us to Narnia like never before. Because it's looking like Greta Gerwig will be starting her multi-film odyssey into the works of C.S. Lewis not with the most famous tale, *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe*, but with *The Magician's Nephew*.

That was, in fact, the sixth Narnia book that Lewis wrote, taking him a longer-than-usual five years to get down on paper. But chronologically it's where the saga begins, a prequel that provides an origin story for the author's magical, beaver-ridden wonderland, explaining where both the witch and the world (not to mention the random lamppost in the middle of a forest) came from. Excitingly, nobody has ever tackled it on screen before (except for a 2018 Japanese manga adaptation enchantingly titled *The Magician's Nephew: I Opened The Wrong Door!*) — Walden Media abandoned plans to shoot it as a film following 2010's *The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader* when their contract with the Lewis estate expired.

The iconic furniture may be missing: Lewis followed the lead of his pal J.R.R. Tolkien and introduced magical rings instead, a yellow one to take characters to Narnia, a green one to get them back. But there's plenty to get excited about regardless. There are villains, in the form of the sneaky, magic-dabbling Uncle Andrew and White-Witch-in-the-making Jadis — rumoured to be played by Daniel Craig and Emma Mackey respectively. There are heroes, two intrepid children named Digory and Polly. And there is a metric ton of magic, thanks to sequences not only in the nascent Narnia but in another universe entirely. Not to mention an extended part where the Witch gets set loose on turn-of-the-20th-century London.

Above: Big-cat energy: Aslan, as seen in 2005's *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe*. **Below:** Writer-director Greta Gerwig.

The vision of Gerwig, who has written the script as well as directing, is yet to be unveiled. But it seems set to be both huge in scope — she fought for a two-week IMAX theatrical release — and bold in flavour, with chatter that Aslan might be voiced this time by Meryl Streep. Hey, as Lewis himself once put it: "Do not dare not to dare." **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

THE FIRST *NARNIA* MOVIE IS IN IMAX CINEMAS ON 26 NOVEMBER 2026, AND ON NETFLIX AT CHRISTMAS 2026

BRIAN WILSON'S BIG-SCREEN LEGACY

CELEBRATING THE LATE BEACH BOYS ICON THROUGH MUCH-LOVED NEEDLE DROPS

'ALL SUMMER LONG'
AMERICAN GRAFFITI 1973

As he calls time on his 1960s odyssey, George Lucas deploys this over the end credits to bittersweet effect, paying tribute to an era that would somehow live forever. We may grow apart and grow old — but some memories never fade.

'GOD ONLY KNOWS'
BOOGIE NIGHTS 1997

Paul Thomas Anderson wraps up his breakout film with a montage catching up with everybody, most of them in pastures new after years of hurt. 'God Only Knows' is the perfect accompaniment, heralding optimism, hope and happiness.

'FEEL FLOWS'
ALMOST FAMOUS 2000

Early on in Cameron Crowe's ode to rock journalism, young William (Patrick Fugit) has an intoxicating moment with groupie Penny Lane (Kate Hudson). Soundtracked by this trippy, blissful production, it feels like a summer dream. **ALEX GODFREY**

Darren Aronofsky just wants to have fun

THE DIRECTOR ON FLEXING HIS COMEDIC CHOPS WITH '90S-SET CRIME MOVIE CAUGHT STEALING

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

"FUN" IS PERHAPS not the word that immediately springs to mind when you think of Darren Aronofsky's oeuvre.

The Brooklyn-born director has conjured numerous gut-punchingly brutal masterpieces — from *Pi* to *Requiem For A Dream* to *Black Swan* — but you'd be hard-pressed to describe any of them as a barrel of laughs. However, "fun" is absolutely the aim with his latest offering.

"The state the world's in right now... There's *a lot* going on," Aronofsky tells *Empire*. "So, I wanted to get back to the core ingredients that make movies great — entertainment and fun. I wanted to make something filled with joy and adventure." That something is *Caught Stealing* — a 1998-set "crime caper", centred on washed-up baseball player Hank (Austin Butler), whose offer to cat-sit for a neighbour accidentally embroils him in a money-laundering scheme that sees everyone from Puerto Rican gangsters to Jewish Mob bosses baying for his blood. "I loved the propulsion, the twists, the oddball characters," says Aronofsky of the script, adapted by Charlie Huston from his 2004 novel. "It's a romp."

Indeed, while both Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* and *Mother!* contained some darkly funny moments, *Caught Stealing* is his first movie in which, at early screenings, "you're hearing that continuous roll of laughter", the director says. "Growing up, I knew a lot of [now-famous] comedians, and they'd always ask: 'Why don't you make a comedy?'" he adds. "I remember Chris Rock telling me, 'There's not much difference between comedy and tragedy.'"

The line is certainly blurry for Butler's Hank, who bumbles his way into a series of increasingly violent misunderstandings. "I think it'll be exciting for Austin's fans to see," Aronofsky says, of Butler's foray into overtly comic territory. "His method is to completely disappear into a character — we saw it in *Elvis*, and he does it with Hank, too." Aiding Hank through the chaos are Zoë Kravitz as his girlfriend Yvonne, and Matt Smith as his punk-rocker neighbour Russ, sporting a flame-coloured Mohawk. "That is Matt's [real hair]," Aronofsky laughs. "It took a little conversation [to convince him to go full Mohican], but he ended up loving it."

Since the film is a "love letter to New York", the director shot on location there — a hazardous experience. "In the East Village, a woman pissed on one of our crew from a fire escape," Aronofsky recalls. "The East Village is insane." He also got to "blow up my childhood neighbourhood" of Brooklyn's Brighton Beach: "I haven't done many chases and explosions and shoot-outs in my career. It was fun."

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

LOVE OF YOUR LIFE

Fresh from his bold stint on *The White Lotus*, **Patrick Schwarzenegger** looks set to join Margaret Qualley in Rachel Morrison's upcoming romantic drama. Plot details are under wraps, but Julia Cox's (*Nyad*) script underwent a fierce bidding war before landing with Amazon, while Ryan Gosling is on board as producer.

CARRIE

The cast list for Mike Flanagan's horror series is making a bigger splash than a bucket of pig's blood. *Prey* breakout **Amber Midthunder** joins Flana-regulars Samantha Sloyan and Kate Siegel, plus Summer Howell in the title role. The eight-episode series for Amazon is filming now in Vancouver.

THE BACKROOMS

Chiwetel Ejiofor co-stars alongside Renate Reinsve in this new sci-fi horror film, based on the viral YouTube series of the same name by 19-year-old Kane Parsons. Ejiofor's character details are yet to be revealed, but given the nature of Parsons' series, expect otherworldly shocks.

Clockwise from main: Foul ball: Hank (Austin Butler) swaps the diamond for danger; Hank and Russ (Matt Smith) hit the town; Yvonne (Zoë Kravitz) and Hank take a breath; Brooklyn's finest; Director Darren Aronofsky on set.

There's the F-word again. For Aronofsky, *Caught Stealing* is truly about allowing audiences to escape "the madness of the world" by immersing them in pure entertainment. "Not every film needs to solve the world's problems," he says. "This film is just about solving the world's problems for two hours." A noble purpose. Let the fun begin.

***CAUGHT STEALING* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 AUGUST**

STAR WARS: STARFIGHTER

There has been a great disturbance in the Force. **Mia Goth** is joining Shawn Levy's *Star Wars* venture — reportedly in a villainous role — versus Ryan Gosling's heroic protagonist. Set five years after *The Rise Of Skywalker*, *Starfighter* hopes to stay on target for a 2027 release date.

THE ADVENTURES OF CLIFF BOOTH

The most unexpected sequel is picking up steam: **Yahya Abdul-Mateen II** has joined the cast of the David Fincher-directed sequel to Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood*. Abdul-Mateen II stars opposite Brad Pitt, who reprises his role as the war vet-turned-stunt double.

THE LIFE AND DEATHS OF WILSON SHEDD

Fresh from playing a Hoodoo-practising priestess in *Sinners*, **Wunmi Mosaku** is now joining the cast of Tim Blake Nelson's next directorial effort, described as a prison-break thriller. Mosaku and Nelson star alongside Amanda Seyfried and Scoot McNairy.

BEING HEUMANN

Mark Ruffalo is returning to the 'righteous justice' themes of his previous films like *Spotlight* and *Dark Waters*: he has signed on to join the cast of this disability-rights drama from *CODA* director Sian Heder. The film is based on the memoir by Judy Heumann.

MEET THE PARENTS SEQUEL

Having defied gravity, will **Ariana Grande** next try to milk a cat? The popstar and *Wicked* actor has joined the next generation of the *Meet The Parents* franchise — with the full Focker family returning for the sequel, including Robert De Niro, Ben Stiller, Teri Polo and Blythe Danner.

Imago

Like father, like son

DADDY ISSUES RUN DEEP IN AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH

WORDS **IAN FREER**

DARTH VADER. JACK TORRANCE. THANOS. When considering the ranks of terrible cinematic dads, don't forget Colonel Miles Quaritch, *Avatar*'s bastard-hard antagonist and biological father to Spider (Jack Champion), the human kid with close ties to the Sully family. And, according to actor Stephen Lang, Quaritch's parental skills are unlikely to improve come the next instalment: *Avatar: Fire And Ash*. "Are things going to get all lovey-dovey?" he barks at *Empire*. "It's doubtful, pal."

At the end of *The Way Of Water*, the pair went their separate ways, Spider rejoining the Sully clan having saved his father's life in the heat of (sea) battle. Now circumstances force a reunion. "They reconnect out of necessity," explains Lang. "Their connection is not a solo connection. There are times when everybody comes together on some level. But, when enemies cooperate, you can be sure betrayal is just around the corner."

Lang — nickname: Slang — suggests the Quaritch-Spider relationship "will just get more difficult, gnarlier" as the saga develops. While the actor acknowledges there are traits of Quaritch in Spider — "If you watch *Avatar*,

Quaritch is a beast. He recognises that feral quality in Spider" — he is excited by the new, conflicted feelings their bond provokes. "Spider confuses Quaritch," says Lang. "but Quaritch wants clarity. There is something about Spider that Quaritch really loves — not a word we associate with him. I think respect and

Mark Fellman. Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

Top to bottom: Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) with his son Miles 'Spider' Socorro (Jack Champion) in *Avatar: Fire And Ash*; Lang and Champion on set.

admiration really develop in spades, as well as animosity and manipulation. The relationship will deepen — for better or worse."

Lang and Champion have been working together for around eight years now. "When we started out, he was a squirt," remembers Lang. "Now he's about a foot-and-a-half taller than I am. He's turned into such a splendid young man." On set, while Champion is playing a human, Lang is decked out in performance-capture get-up to play Quaritch as a Na'vi avatar.

"I am supposed to be a 10' 2" figure so the differences can be quite technical, because we're talking about eye-line," he says. "But we just dig it. Any difficulty gets incorporated into the fabric of the work." Missing out on the performance-capture fun in the first film — "I was full of envy and resentment" — Lang fully embraced the technology during *The Way Of Water*. "It represents such an opportunity for a type of purity in acting," he says. "I've acted under heavy prosthetics, I've acted in the nude, I've acted in all kinds of ways. Performance capture is just another variant [of] that. You'd be nuts not to perceive it as a positive."

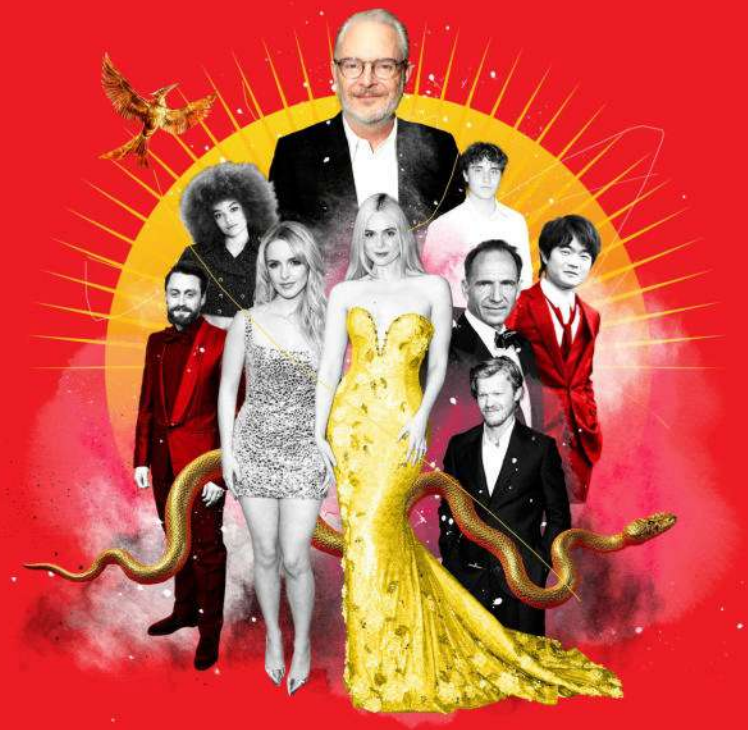
Cameron gives his actors creative latitude, Lang says, but is not afraid to step in and tweak — he has even been known to act out the odd scene for his cast. "Whenever he does that, I say, 'Oh, would you mind doing that again, a little slower maybe?'" Lang laughs. "He'll just shake his head and say, 'You know, Slang, go fuck yourself.'"

Attempts to direct his director aside, Lang is fully aware of the unique opportunity that working with Cameron and Champion on *Avatar* provides. "I look forward to our next stint working together," he concludes. "What a great adventure to be on, to have this time to develop these characters, these relationships." Plenty of time, then, to earn that World's Best Dad mug from WHSmith (Pandora branch).

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER**

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON... THE HUNGER GAMES: SUNRISE ON THE REAPING



IT CONNECTS THE ORIGINAL *HUNGER GAMES* MOVIES AND THE PREQUEL

The fifth chapter in Suzanne Collins' hugely successful young-adult series is set 40 years after the events of prequel *The Ballad Of Songbirds & Snakes* and 24 years before *The Hunger Games*. *Reaping* charts the origins of Haymitch Abernathy (played in the original films by Woody Harrelson). Set during the 50th Hunger Games, the new movie will follow 16-year-old rebel Haymitch (Joseph Zada) as he partakes in the brutal annual death-match hosted by the wealthy Capitol in order to control the surrounding impoverished districts.

IT ADDRESSES FAKE NEWS

Collins' novel was announced in June 2024, with the author confirming that the plot, which sees Haymitch take on the Capitol from within the games, was inspired by society today. "The story [lent] itself to a deeper dive into the use of propaganda and the power of those who control the narrative," she said. "The question, 'Real or not real?' seems more pressing to me every day."

HAYMITCH ISN'T THE ONLY FAMILIAR NAME

Many characters from the original *Hunger Games* films will appear in younger form. Coriolanus Snow is now the sinister Capitol president, with former dark lord Ralph Fiennes taking the mantle from Donald Sutherland. Kieran Culkin replaces Stanley Tucci as tournament host Caesar Flickerman. Elle Fanning will be stylist Effie Trinket (formerly Elizabeth Banks), and Jesse Plemons, having played Philip Seymour Hoffman's son in *The Master*, now steps into his shoes as cameraman Plutarch Heavensbee. Then there's the currently uncast Burdock Everdeen, Haymitch's best friend and future dad to Katniss Everdeen.

THERE ARE PLENTY OF NEW CHARACTERS, TOO

Lenore Dove Baird (Whitney Peak), Haymitch's girlfriend, continues the story of the Covey, the travelling musical troupe that Rachel Zegler's Lucy Gray Baird belonged to in *Songbirds & Snakes*. Meanwhile *Karate Kid: Legends* breakout star Ben Wang and *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire*'s Mckenna Grace will play fellow tributes (contenders) Wyatt Callow and Maysilee Donner in the games.

AN OLD HAND IS AT THE HELM

Francis Lawrence returns to direct the latest in the *Hunger Games* franchise, having shot four of the existing five films. With the filmmaker declaring *Reaping* "quite possibly my favourite book in the series" and with screenwriter Billy Ray back on adapting duties for the first time since the original movie, the games are officially afoot. **BETH WEBB**

***THE HUNGER GAMES: SUNRISE ON THE REAPING* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 20 NOVEMBER 2026**

The Spotlight

Tyriq Withers

THE *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* STAR IS FINDING HIS STRENGTH IN HIS DIFFERENCES

WORDS **IANA MURRAY**

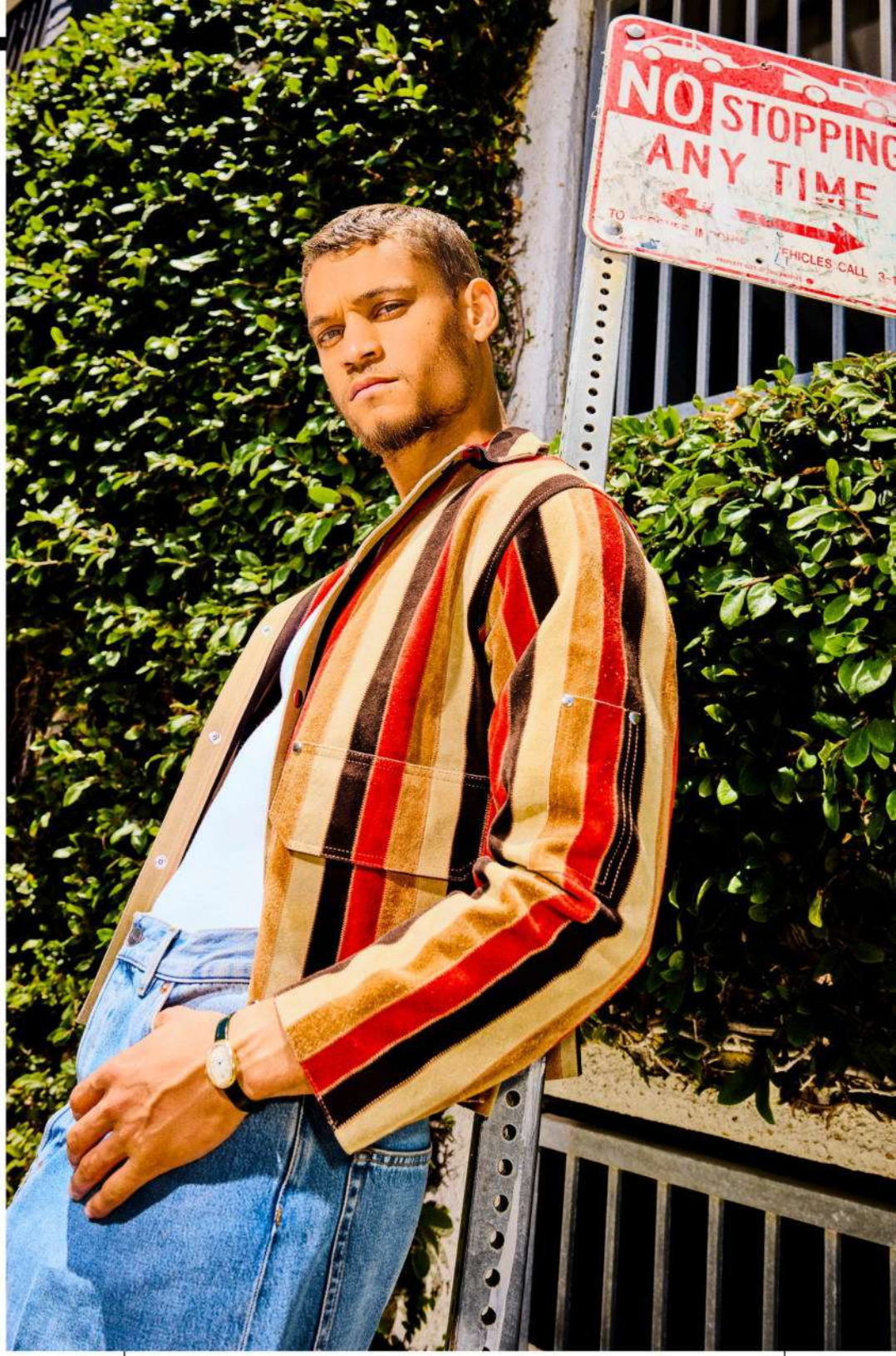
SAM McGUIRE

TYRIQ WITHERS' FACE is burning red-hot. "Did you watch that?" he asks, at the mention of a little-seen 2020 short film titled *:):* that's still lingering on YouTube. It was the actor's very first on-screen role: a six-minute exploration of a struggling uni student shot entirely in centred close-ups of his face. If Withers is a little embarrassed, he's grateful all the same. "It just taught me so much [about] accessing my own personal life to bring to the screen," he explains.

In the five years since that short, 26-year-old Withers has been excavating the deepest parts of himself through projects of escalating size, from a breakout spot on Donald Glover's series *Atlanta* — in which his character undergoes a 'Black Eligibility' test — to his upcoming major roles in the *I Know What You Did Last Summer* reboot and the Jordan Peele-produced sports horror *Him*. "That whole identity crisis that I've felt my entire life — not being white enough, not being Black enough, and just finding a [seat at the] table," he says. "That's what I've pulled mostly into my characters."

Withers' first inspirations were unconventional, to say the least. Sure, he grew up hoping to model his career on the likes of Denzel Washington and Jake Gyllenhaal, but his main aspiration was to be part of the Disney Channel. When his mother took him as a child to a casting call with agents, it seemed like his dream was coming true. "I thought it was my moment!" he recalls. It was only when the so-called agents demanded thousands of dollars that his mother realised they had inadvertently walked into a sketchy scam.

So acting circled back to him later. Withers attended Florida State University, where he played for his local American football team. "I would start to skip practice for certain



Above and right: Photographed for *Empire* on Venice Beach and at Hotel Erwin, Los Angeles, on 15 June 2025. **Far right:** Taking a breather in *I Know What You Did Last Summer*.

BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

THE BOOK

***REMINDERS OF HIM* BY COLLEEN HOOVER**

"I'm making the movie right now. That book is my holy grail."

THE SHOW

GINNY & GEORGIA

"Season 1 came out when I was really getting into my acting career. I see myself in the character [Ginny] and the show is like a comfort-watch for me. What I'm filming right now, my co-star is just starting it and I'm sitting there watching episodes with her."

THE ALBUM

***GOLD* BY CLEO SOL**

"Specifically the song 'Things Will Get Better', because I texted [my friend], I was like, 'I'm having a bad day,' and she sent me that song."

things," he admits, acknowledging his heart wasn't in it. When the school's Black Student Union held auditions for a play, he lied to his coach so he could try out for a role. "I did a Will Smith, *Fresh Prince Of Bel-Air* monologue."

He ventures into decidedly darker territory in *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, the sequel to the 1998 film, which once again sees a group of friends hunted by a hook-wielding killer. He plays outwardly energetic student Teddy, who is masking a troubled relationship with his parents. "He's really a sad boy who wasn't taught how to deal with his emotions," he explains. Fortunately for a self-admitted scaredy cat, filming was anything but horrifying. Withers fondly remembers playing puzzle games with the cast in-between takes, and developing a bond with his legacy co-star Freddie Prinze Jr. "It became such a family vibe, rather than some daunting, dark movie."

As for *Him*, a surreal-looking body horror, Withers steps into his first major lead role, aptly as an American football player pushing himself to the brink in the pursuit of glory. He drew not only from thematically similar films like *Black Swan* and *Whiplash*, but also from his own stint in the high-pressure sport. "That was a fun thing to explore as a cathartic experience," he reflects. "Getting into college, getting straight As, that obsession — I think that overall energy was pulled into *Him*. I think *Him* is bigger than football; it's a story about somebody who's creating his own definition of greatness." For an actor who switched athletics for performing, Withers has truly come full circle.

***I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 18 JULY**

Main: Striped jacket: Bode; Jeans: Gucci; Vest: stylist's own; Watch: Cartier; Boots: Louis Vuitton. Inset: JW Anderson. Grooming: Tasha Brown at The Wall Group using Chanel. Assisted by: Eliza Young. Styling: Jason Bolden. Assisted by: Kelsey Douglas. Additional imagery: Imago

May the Schwartz be with you: the space parody is back.

NEW BALLS, PLEASE

SPACEBALLS 2 IS COMING. HERE'S WHAT TO EXPECT

GADDING ABOUT!

It's been nearly 40 years since Mel Brooks took the piss out of *Star Wars* with *Spaceballs*, a supremely silly and self-aware spoof. It wasn't a huge box-office hit, but time has been kind to it. Josh Gad (yes, Olaf from *Frozen*) has been talking about a sequel for a while, and now it's actually going to warp speed (wrong franchise) with Gad as co-star and co-writer, and Josh Greenbaum (director of *Barb & Star Go To Vista Del Mar*) calling the shots. Greenbaum has a pleasing command of the absurd, and could be an inspired choice.

BROOKS IS BACK!

At the grand old age of 99, Brooks will not only produce but also reprise his role as Yogurt, the wise old alien who in no way bears any resemblance to Yoda. Will he once again spend a considerable amount of time plugging *Spaceballs* merchandise? Hope so.

MORANIS RETURNS!

Many have tried to lure Rick Moranis out of retirement since he hung up his acting spurs. Many have failed. But few can resist the call of Mel Brooks' Dark Helmet, and so Moranis will make his first appearance on the big screen since he lent his voice to *Brother Bear 2* in 2006. No doubt the Schwartz is still strong in the Canadian comedy legend.

Right: Mel Brooks as Yogurt in the original film.

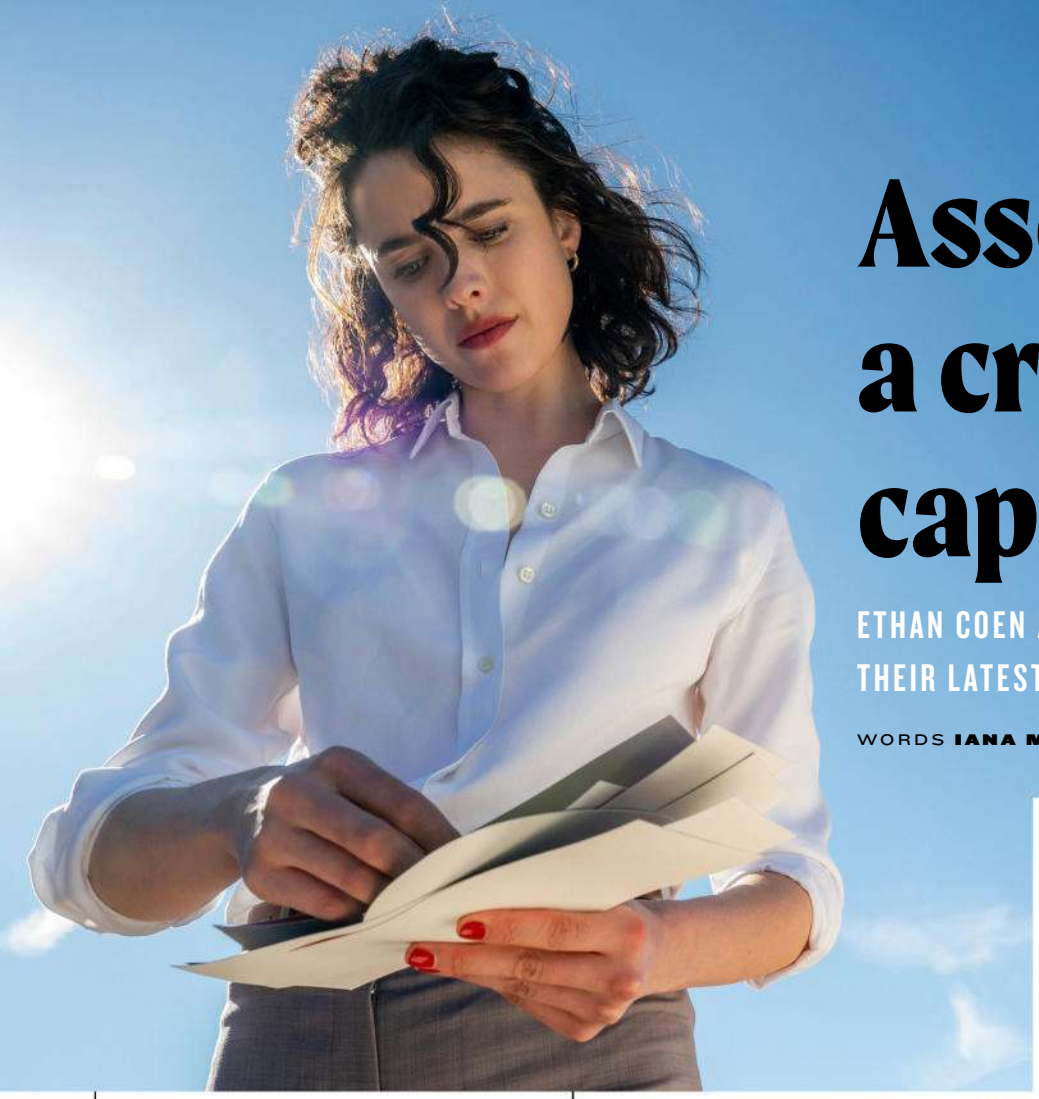
PULLMAN & PULLMAN!

Spaceballs was one of the first movies to provide a platform for Bill Pullman as the heroic, erm, hero Lone Starr, a cross between Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and utter buffoon. But now Bill will be joined by his son, Lewis, marking the first time the Pullmen have shared the screen since 2017. Have Lone Starr and Princess Vespa (Daphne Zuniga, also returning) sired a son? We'll find out quicker than you can say Kylo Ren.

ALL-NEW GAG-FODDER!

Much has changed in the galaxy since the first *Spaceballs*. Back then, there were just three *Star Wars* films. Now, it's a franchise with more movies, TV shows, spin-offs and sequels than you can shake a laser sword at, so that should be ripe for merciless mickey-taking. And don't expect the movie to stop there — just as *Spaceballs* lampooned *Alien* and other sci-fi films, could the likes of the MCU also be in for a kicking? **CHRIS HEWITT**

***SPACEBALLS 2* WILL BE IN CINEMAS IN 2027**



Assembling a crime-caper cohort

ETHAN COEN AND TRICIA COOKE ON BUILDING THEIR LATEST MOTLEY CREW FOR HONEY DON'T!

WORDS **IANA MURRAY**

ETHAN COEN AND Tricia Cooke have cracked something of a screenwriting formula: riotous genre homages with a lesbian twist and plenty of oddball characters. It began with last year's queer road-trip movie *Drive-Away Dolls*, and now they return with *Honey Don't!*, starring their newfound muse, Margaret Qualley. Playing a quick-witted private investigator, Qualley's Honey sets out to uncover the connection between a series of strange deaths and a mysterious cult. Speaking to *Empire*, Coen and Cooke explain how they cooked up the players of their darkly comedic detective noir.

THE PRIVATE EYE

The pair had already written *Honey Don't!* by the time they'd met Qualley for *Drive-Away Dolls*. They hit it off right away, and knew that they had to bring her back to play the titular detective. "We wanted someone who was very self-possessed, and could kick some ass, and Margaret can do all of those things," says Cooke. "We felt like she was the quintessential 1940s actress." For the character, Coen and Cooke were inspired by classic Hollywood stars like Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. The latter was especially influential: Qualley would constantly listen to recordings of Bacall's voice on set to help produce Honey's low, dulcet tones.

THE FEMME FATALE

The usually reserved and solitary Honey lets her guard down romantically with MG Falcone (Aubrey Plaza), a cop at the local precinct with her own dark secrets. Rather than writing an archetype, Cooke explains that she wanted to invert the gendered dynamics of Honey and MG's relationship, "so the femme was the detective and the butch woman was the femme fatale". Those flipped roles came into play in their intimate moments. For one early scene where MG and Honey get frisky on their first date, Coen and Cooke took on Plaza's notes about reversing who was, well, giving and receiving. "[We went], 'Oh, okay, the actor has some ideas about the finger-fucking scene,'" Coen jokes. "'This I gotta hear.'"

THE DETECTIVE

One of Honey's less complicated relationships is with Marty Metakawitch (Charlie Day), a police detective who just can't seem to take the hint that she's only interested in women. "Honey enjoys the power that she has over Marty because he just won't give up, and that amuses her," Cooke says. Day was a crucial player when it came to the film's comedic moments. "It all just seems really easy for Charlie," Coen adds. "He opens his mouth and it's funny."

THE SUSPECT

As Honey investigates the suspected murder of a client, the clues lead her to the shady dealings of the Four-Way Temple, a cult-like organisation fronted by the corrupt Drew Devlin. Seeing Chris Evans play the villain in *Knives Out* convinced the filmmakers that he could be Honey's smooth-talking adversary. "He's Captain America, but he's an actor," Coen says simply. "He can be bad, and attractive while he's being bad." Cooke adds that Evans worked especially hard to nail the bizarre sermon Drew delivers to his followers. "He was there revving them up and getting all the extras excited for the sermon," Cooke says of the day they shot the scene. "I think he enjoyed that." When it comes to working a crowd, Evans could do it all day.

Top to bottom: Kick-ass PI Honey O'Donahue (Margaret Qualley); Honey with cop MG Falcone (Aubrey Plaza); Detective Marty (Charlie Day); Reverend Drew (Chris Evans).

***HONEY DON'T!* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 5 SEPTEMBER**

THE ACTIVIST STORMING HOLLYWOOD

PHOTOGRAPHER AND CAMPAIGNER MISAN HARRIMAN IS THE FOCUS OF NEW DOC *SHOOT THE PEOPLE*

IN 2020, IN the wake of George Floyd's murder and Black Lives Matters protests, social activist Misan Harriman picked up a camera. His powerful images of the BLM movement in the UK — which gained global attention after one was shared by Martin Luther King III — would lead him to become, alongside his campaign work, one of Hollywood's most in-demand photographers. And beyond capturing the likes of Tom Cruise, Cate Blanchett and Olivia Colman, he's turned to filmmaking with Oscar-nominated, David Oyelowo-starring 2023 short film *The After*.

It was only a matter of time before Harriman moved in front of the camera, as the subject of documentary *Shoot The People*. Directed by Andy Mundy-Castle, the film follows Harriman as an international activist, travelling the UK, Africa and Italy and photographing fellow campaigners as they strive for social justice.

"This is an earnest but unapologetic seed [needed] to paint the future that I think we all know we must fight for," says Harriman of *Shoot The People*. "It's part of the blueprint of a new world through my lens; the movement of the people across three continents."

After being impressed by the "delicacy but fearless intentionality" of Mundy-Castle's BAFTA-winning doc *White Nanny Black Child* — about Nigerians fostered by white families between 1955 and '95 — Harriman sought out the director to help bring his vision to life. "It's the story of somebody questioning their journey as an activist," says Mundy-Castle. "It's a question everybody needs to ask: 'What are you doing with whatever level of privilege and cultural capital you have?'"

Harriman hopes *Shoot The People*'s impact will stretch far beyond the present moment. "My children are young. I want them to know when they become adults that I did everything that I could to forge a world that they deserve to inherit." Until then, the multi-hyphenate artist is looking to reteam with Mundy-Castle and Oyelowo and step back into feature filmmaking. "Our collective past has not been explored properly in cinema and in documentaries," he explains. "I've not seen any major films made about the resistance in Haiti. I've barely seen any dramas about Black people thriving. And I want the Arab man and woman to be humanised more in cinema." From subject back to filmmaker: the next stage of Harriman's improbable journey is set. **AMON WARMANN**

Clockwise from main: Misan Harriman considers his next shot; In front of the camera for a change; People power.

***SHOOT THE PEOPLE* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... SKIBIDI TOILET, OSCAR-WINNER?

Could this be the first bog-man-related Best Picture nominee? The Michael Bay-backed movie adaptation of the viral animation is currently shooting with Oscar-winning VFX supervisor Rob Legato (*Avatar*, *Titanic*). It's theirs to loo-se.

ALEX GODFREY IS THINKING ABOUT... A FUNNY FAWN

I was recently reminded that Audrey Hepburn had a pet fawn called Pippin, which she took to parties and supermarkets. And now all I want to do is go grocery shopping with Audrey Hepburn and her baby deer. Is that too much to ask?

JORDAN KING IS THINKING ABOUT... B2EMO

Andor is over. My mind is a sunless space. And yet a part of my brain still kindles a flame. That flame? Hope. Hope that good boy B2EMO and his one-eyed WALL•E-looking friend might yet get their own buddy-comedy spin-off. Kathleen, call me…

Courtesy of Doc Hearts, Marco Vittur

A monster movie escapes its shackles

READY FOR MUTANT MAYHEM? THERE'S NO STOPPING THE TOXIC AVENGER

WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

FOR A WHILE there, it looked to Macon Blair like his second movie as a writer-director might actually be unreleasable. That's what some commentators were saying about Blair's remake of cult classic *The Toxic Avenger* — about a janitor (Peter Dinklage) who transforms into a mutant vigilante after a freak accident — which he completed back in 2022. "It was kind of scary and discouraging to have the movie on the shelf for that long," he tells *Empire*. "Like, is this movie going to get *Batgirl*ed?!"

Blair is perhaps now best recognised as *Oppenheimer*'s lawyer in Christopher Nolan's bomb-buster. But he's also an award-winning indie filmmaker, earning the *Toxic Avenger* gig from Legendary Pictures on the strength of his Coen-esque 2017 debut *I Don't Feel At Home In This World Anymore*. Not to mention the fact that he's a huge fan of Michael Herz and Lloyd Kaufman's original 1984 *Toxic Avenger*: a hyper-violent, shoestring-budget superhero/monster-comedy hybrid whose hero is a hideous, mop-wielding mutant freak (played physically here by Luisa Guerreiro, in a suit, but voiced by Dinklage).

Indeed, Blair's fidelity to Kaufman's lo-fi splatterthon led to the "misunderstanding" that his remake was "unreleasable because it was so extreme". A myth that was only bolstered when it was eventually rescued by US distributor

Cineverse — the outfit behind the *Terrifier* movies. "It's not as bloody or gore-filled as those," Blair insists. "It's quite tame, as a matter of fact, by the metric of what's out there." Which left him with the troubling thought that, "Oh, it's just unreleasable because nobody likes it."

However, he knew from the start that *The Toxic Avenger* was made, "for better or for worse, for a very particular audience". It's a film which, he says, "has the sort of sophomoric humour and rough-around-the-edges vibe that appeals to me. So if I'm making something that appeals to *me*, there will be a subsection of the audience that it appeals to as well."

Top to bottom: Toxie slumped beside Bob Garbinger (Kevin Bacon); Toxie alter-ego Winston (Peter Dinklage); Macon Blair brings new meaning to the word "close-up".

The movie sat for so long on the shelf, he thinks, because "the market was flat and people didn't want anything that wasn't a sure-fire crowd-pleaser. They didn't want anything that wasn't more towards the middle of the road. The line I keep repeating is: 'It's not for everybody, but the people that it is for? It's *very much* for them.'"

Fortunately for Blair, those people included the gorehounds at Cineverse. "They *got* it," he says. "Not like, 'We'll just acquire a property and we'll dump it somewhere.' They really wanted to heavily promote and put it out there [in cinemas]." Ultimately, it's worked out better than it might have otherwise, he believes. "If waiting for a couple of years for the dust to settle meant getting picked up by an outfit who's really going to give it a lot of energy and love, then that was a great outcome. I'm very grateful it ended up how it did. I wouldn't change a thing." There's no best-before date, it seems, for hideously mutated monsters.

***THE TOXIC AVENGER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 AUGUST**

Getty Images

THE MONTHLY MIXTAPE

EMPIRE MIXMASTER AMON WARMANN SELECTS THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL TUNES

'THEME FROM SUPERMAN (OFFICIAL TRAILER VERSION)'
JOHN MURPHY

SUPERMAN

This interpretation of John Williams' iconic *Superman* theme — now with thundering drums and swelling guitar solo delivering the much-loved melody — is a big, bold, modern update for the new Man Of Steel.

'LOSE MY MIND'
DON TOLIVER FEAT. DOJA CAT

F1

This slick, synth-heavy bop transports us from the racing track to the club via electronic beats and catchy vocals. Bonus points for Doja Cat showcasing her superstar versatility.

'MAGIC'
PILOT

HAPPY GILMORE 2 TRAILER

Having served as something of a theme song for the original golf comedy, this cheerful needle drop returns over 20 years later for the Adam Sandler-fronted sequel, to welcome fans back to their Happy place.

'FIGHT LIKE A GIRL'
EVANESCENCE FEAT. K.FLAY

BALLERINA

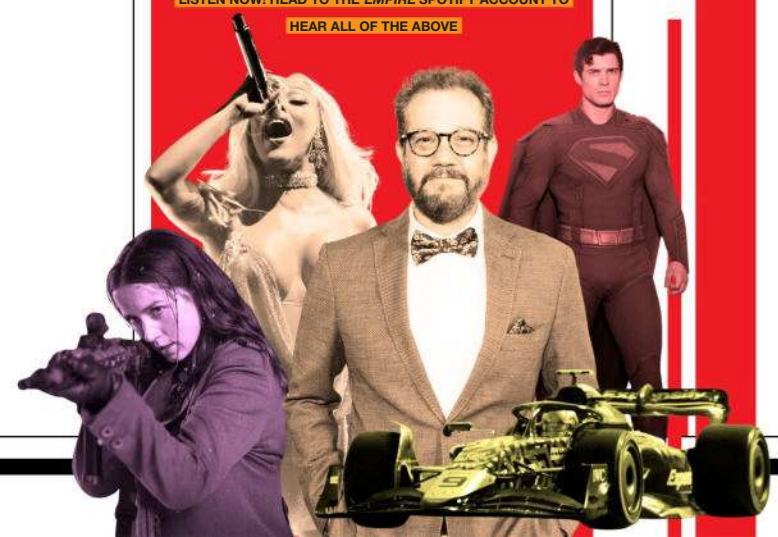
Killer guitar riffs and frontwoman Amy Lee's ever-powerful vocals make this a fitting end-credits soundtrack for this action-heavy spin-off.

'THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS MAIN THEME'
MICHAEL GIACCHINO

THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS

Building from a soft, slow start to a triumphant finish, and featuring a motif of four identical notes, this track is a retro delight worthy of the superhero quarter.

LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE *EMPIRE* SPOTIFY ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE



Here: Welcome to the world of The Lands Between. **Below:** Director Alex Garland gets his game face on.

THE LORD OF THE RING

AWARDS-HOOVERING VIDEO GAME ELDEN RING IS GETTING AN ALEX GARLAND-HELMED MOVIE ADAPTATION. BUT WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

OKAY, WHAT IS AN ELDEN RING?

It's a game — widely considered to be among the best ever made — directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki, the man behind the famous *Dark Souls* series, and released in 2022. It is vast, difficult, and set in a huge open world called The Lands Between. You play an immortal being called a Tarnished, who wants to become a god. You also die. A lot.

AND THE GAME IS WRITTEN BY GEORGE R.R. MARTIN, RIGHT? SO IT MUST HAVE A GREAT STORY.

Sort of. George wasn't so much author as vibes man on this one, with his contribution focused on world-building, rather than an actual narrative. The story itself is incredibly opaque — in fact, the vast majority of the lore isn't found through gameplay at all, but has to be mined from the description text on bits of armour and weapons you pick up along the way.

THAT MAKES NO SENSE. SO THERE'S NO STORY AT ALL?

There is, but it's presented in a deliberately vague manner. Essentially, the Elden Ring is a giant rune that holds reality together (a bit like the Infinity Stones). It was protected by a god called Marika, who went mad, shattered the Ring and got imprisoned in a giant tree (don't ask). Her various demi-god offspring gathered the broken pieces, which the Tarnished now seeks to unite and in doing so become the new Elden Lord.

AND ARE THERE MEMORABLE CHARACTERS?

They're certainly odd, and often morose, speaking in cryptic riddles. There's a woman who eats eyes, a serial killer called Dung Eater, a lonely jellyfish, and a divine emissary called the Two Fingers, who is... a pair of giant, hairy fingers. Best not to dwell too much on that one.

HOW ON EARTH IS ALEX GARLAND GOING TO MAKE SENSE OF THIS?

Good question! He'll want to retain elements of the game's confusing nature or it won't feel like *Elden Ring* — something Garland knows all too well, having played through the game a reported seven times. Plus, he'll likely cleave very closely to Miyazaki's mournful tone and the dilapidated aesthetic of The Lands Between with all its twisted inhabitants, which his experience on *Annihilation* should help with. But he's going to need to do some heavy lifting to turn the game into a coherent-enough story for cinemas. Still, if anyone can stick the Two Fingers up at the detractors and pull this one off, our money's on Garland.

JAMES DYER

Taking steps to survive

THE LONG WALK BREAKS ITS CURSE, FINALLY MARCHING INTO CINEMAS

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

THE LONG WALK has been on a long walk. The dystopian novel was among the first written by Stephen King while he was still a student in the 1960s, published in 1979 under the pseudonym Richard Bachman. It detailed a hellish and deadly walking competition in an alternative America, where 100 men compete to walk indefinitely without stopping, with only the last man standing allowed to survive. Multiple filmmakers have tried and failed to bring it to the screen — including George A. Romero and Frank Darabont — but all have failed. Some even considered it unfilmable. Until now.

"I wasn't aware of the fact that everybody had tried to make it over the course of 30 years," chuckles screenwriter JT Mollner, who has finally broken the curse. "Which is probably a good thing. It's Hollywood folklore. Part of it was just naivety, thinking that it wouldn't be a problem."

Far from being unfilmable, *The Long Walk* turned out to be extremely filmable according to director Francis Lawrence, who has helmed most of the *Hunger Games* franchise. "A couple of years ago, I saw the book sitting on my shelf in the hallway of my house and wondered what happened to the film version," he recalls. "That same day, [producer] Roy Lee called me and asked me if I would be interested in directing. Quite honestly, sometimes adaptations develop for years and years and years. Sometimes it never happens. This was so fast. It all just kind of happened in a way that is very, very rare."

Part of the issue that befell previous filmmakers was making this story visually interesting: a bunch of lads going for a walk does not exactly scream with cinematic potential. "One of the things that excited me about JT writing the adaptation of it was that he thinks like a filmmaker," explains Lawrence. "He's obviously a very accomplished filmmaker himself," — Mollner directed the 2023 thriller *Strange Darling* — "and so to come at the story with a cinematic point-of-view and not just a dialogue or character point-of-view was really helpful."

The pair were keen to keep things fresh. They discarded the multiple scripts that had been previously written — though Lawrence admits, "I read some of them," finding the pitfalls

and the "trickiness of the adaptation process" that earlier attempts encountered. Instead, they played a little loose with the source material. "We love this book," asserts Mollner. "We love Stephen King. We want to make sure all his themes of hopelessness and the cycle of violence

Clockwise from main: Feeling the burn: Garraty (Cooper Hoffman) and McVries (David Jonsson); Mark Hamill plays the Major; Director Francis Lawrence, producer JT Mollner and Hoffman on set; Foil capes just out of shot. **Inset, below right:** Stephen King.

Getty Images

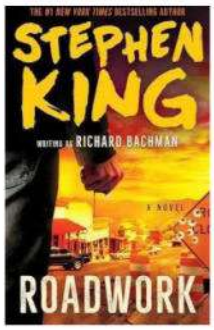
stayed the way it was in the book. But we wanted to also do some things that would surprise the audience, so it wasn't just a play." (King — famously hard to impress with many of his filmed adaptations — has seen the film and "seemed very pleased", according to Lawrence.)

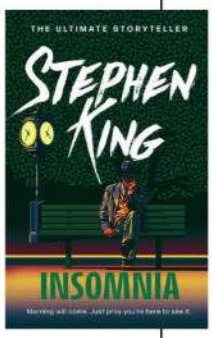
Though it finally came together quickly, making *The Long Walk* was not without its challenges. Life had to imitate art in some ways. "This was a production that was entirely on the move," says Lawrence. "We would walk and walk and walk. Every single take was probably three-quarters-of-a-mile long. The guys who made it to the end ended up walking close to 350 miles in the making of this movie." Early into the shoot, the cast — which includes Cooper Hoffman, David Jonsson and Ben Wang — began to feel the heat. "They started thinking: 'What the fuck have we signed up for?' It was 100 degrees out there. They all got blisters. They all got sunburnt. In a way, they were going through what their characters are going through." Thankfully, though, without the threat of a dystopian death sentence.

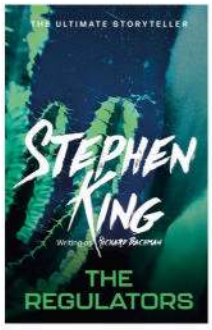
***THE LONG WALK* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 SEPTEMBER**

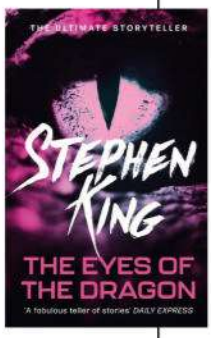
KING THAT'S WORTH A SWING

MOST STEPHEN KING STORIES HAVE HIT THE SCREEN. WE SELECT FOUR THAT HAVEN'T BUT SHOULD









ROADWORK

THE PITCH: The '70s-set thriller was announced as getting a big-screen adaptation in 2019, with Argentine filmmaker Pablo Trapero attached. It's been crickets since, however, and so one can assume that this story about a regular guy driven to the edge is back on the menu. Dawes, the man in question, takes extreme measures after the home he shared with his now-deceased son faces demolition. Written by King in the aftermath of his mother's death, this raw rumination on grief feels ripe for a modern retelling.

SUGGESTED DIRECTOR: Lynne Ramsay. Nailed the unravelling-man character study with *You Were Never Really Here* and can apply those sensibilities to King's story.

INSOMNIA

THE PITCH: We're heding to Derry later this year with an *It* prequel series, so what better time to dive further into King's go-to fictional town? *Insomnia* also includes connections to the author's *Dark Tower* series, currently being adapted by Mike Flanagan. The stage is set, then, for this warped story about a retired resident's sleep deprivation that leads him to see auras, "little bald doctors" and other realms of reality before facing off with the Crimson King, the overall Big Bad of all things *Dark Tower*.

SUGGESTED DIRECTOR: Nia DaCosta. Can handle iconic villains (see: her *Candyman* remake) and is taking over the *28 Years Later* mantle next year, proving she can make well-known worlds her own.

THE REGULATORS

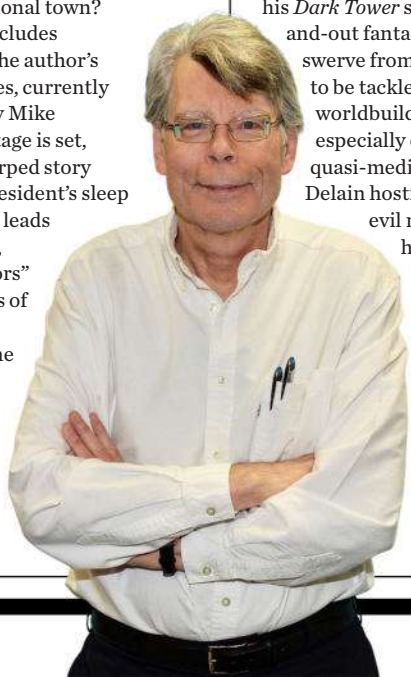
THE PITCH: King's small-town scarefest began life as a screenplay before he reimagined it as one of his Richard Bachman-penned novels. It follows an otherworldly being who wreaks havoc on an Ohio neighbourhood, with plenty of local drama to stir the pot. Again the book was optioned, this time in 2022, with no news on the project since. Do your bidding.

SUGGESTED DIRECTOR: Peter Jackson. Not least because he shares a name with a character in the book, but also because he got his start in horror and is long overdue a reunion with the genre.

THE EYES OF THE DRAGON

THE PITCH: Set within the In-World of his *Dark Tower* series , this down-and-out fantasy is a tonal swerve from King that has yet to be tackled on screen. The worldbuilding potential here is especially exciting, with the quasi-medieval kingdom of Delain hosting this tale of an evil magician, Flagg, and his mission to overthrow the king. A mystical epic awaits!

SUGGESTED DIRECTOR: David Lowery. Did wonders with *The Green Knight*, a medieval fable with astonishing visual flair. **BETH WEBB**



Stormzy storms the screen

THE BRITISH-GHANAIAN RAPPER IS MOVING INTO ACTING, AND THAT'S JUST THE START OF HIS PLANS

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

SITTING IN A room on the 11th floor of Battersea Power Station, Michael 'Stormzy' Omari sets down the vanilla yoghurt he's been eating. He's just admitted to — in *Empire*'s eyes at least — the ultimate movie sin. "I'm a psychopath," he explains. "People say that I'm crazy because I watch films on my phone."

For one of Britain's most prolific and philanthropic rappers — who alongside being a three-time Brit-winner provides Cambridge University scholarships for Black students — the rulebook can be rewritten a little. Although Stormzy had better start getting used to larger screens, not least because he's just appeared in his first lead acting role. In short film *Big Man*, the 31-year-old stars as rapper Tenzman, whose stagnating career is reinvigorated after he takes a spontaneous day trip with two lively neighbourhood kids. Despite the film's sweet nature and 20-minute runtime, filming it was far from an easy experience for the platinum-selling artist. "It was really uncomfortable, but I [thrive on being] uncomfortable," he says of the shoot, which involved improvised dialogue between himself and his teen co-stars. "I felt like that was getting thrown in the deep end with no script," he continues. "I ain't even got a line [of dialogue] to go back on and rehearse. It was just the moment, and you're in it."

Top to bottom: Stormzy as rapper Tenzman; A relaxed moment on location; Telling it like it is.

Big Man is not only significant to Stormzy as a budding actor; it's the first project to be released under his new production company #Merky Films (sharing a name with his other ventures #Merky Books, #Merky FC and the #Merky Foundation). With a mission to spotlight unsung and authentic British voices, the company has already inked a deal with Netflix, with plans for a TV drama series and a biopic of a public figure in the pipeline. He's keeping details of both under wraps, but as with all of #Merky's projects, Stormzy wants to be as hands-on as possible. "I don't like there to be distance between myself and the idea because I think my gift is my taste, my intuition and my perspective," he says. He admits that it's going to take a lot of learning along the way, but he, along with his company, are willing to put in the work: "We're new around here, but we've got big ambitions."

He's applying that ethos to acting as well. As a kid he repeatedly watched *Titanic* and *Sister Act 2: Back In The Habit* ("There's a big difference," he says of why he prefers the sequel to the original), and grew to appreciate committed performances, like Heath Ledger's in *The Dark Knight*. "I love when you see someone eerily embody a role," he enthuses. It's a performance that's inspired his own goals as an actor: "I would definitely want to do something that's far removed from me, that allows me to dive into a different perspective."

Some big aspirations then for this Big Man. Let's just hope he upgrades to some bigger screens as well.

***BIG MAN* IS OUT ON YOUTUBE NOW**

Imago, Jason Nocito

PULLING OFF THE SUMMER'S CRAZIEST STUNT

HOW TOM CRUISE PULLED OFF A RECORD-BREAKING FEAT IN *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING*

"HOW ARE YOU still alive?"

That, dear readers, is the question that *Empire* puts to Tom Cruise about *Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning*. Specifically, the film's most audacious (and Guinness World Record-breaking) stunt, in which Ethan Hunt escapes from a burning plane via parachute, only for that parachute to then burn up, leading to Ethan free-falling through the clouds. Which, by extension, means that Tom Cruise was free-falling through the clouds. And he wanted very much to be in a position to answer questions like, "How are you still alive?" when the stunt was over. "That was a whole story unto itself," Cruise tells us. "How do we do that? How do I film myself burning a parachute and then recovering?"

The solution that Cruise, writer-director Christopher McQuarrie, and the film's stunt coordinator Wade Eastwood arrived at was this: they would attach a camera to Cruise's chest via a rig called the SnorriCam, and actually set Cruise's parachute alight just seconds after he had jumped out of a plane. "He was actually lighting the thing himself," Eastwood reveals. "He was turning the camera on before he jumped out, he was lighting the parachute, he was doing the whole shot."

And after all that, he had to pull his parachute before a certain cut-off point, or he'd become a literal Cruise missile, slamming into the ground at terminal velocity. "Our landing zone was at 6,000 feet," says Cruise. "The air is thinner, you're landing at higher speeds. Every landing was like a crash landing. Never a dull moment, man."

Top to bottom: Burning man: Tom Cruise executing another history-making stunt; Safely on the ground with writer-director-concerned-friend Christopher McQuarrie; Plunging to earth and into the record books.

For McQuarrie, who had to watch his leading man perform the stunt 16 times in total (the number scored Cruise the Guinness World Records title for most burning-parachute jumps), that might be the understatement of the year. "When you're skydiving, you must be facing downward when you open the parachute," he tells *Empire*. "Tom would often have to roll over onto his belly, and seconds represent thousands of feet. So the longer it takes to roll over onto your belly, the lower you are, and all of those things add up to a great deal of suspense and anxiety."

To the point where extreme measures were taken to stop Cruise from doing any more jumps. "I didn't tell him," laughs Eastwood, "but I actually hid the last burning parachute because I didn't want him to do it anymore." Mind you, he'd already broken a world record by that point. Nothing, it seems, is impossible. **CHRIS HEWITT**

FOR MORE ON THE SECRETS OF THE FILM, *EMPIRE*'S *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — THE FINAL RECKONING* SPOILER SPECIAL IS AVAILABLE NOW VIA EMPIRE.SUPPORTINGCAST.FM

THE WEIRDEST A-LIST RECORD-BREAKERS

TOM CRUISE IS THE LATEST IN AN ALL-STAR LINE-UP OF WACKY WINNERS

JOHN CENA

WORLD RECORD FOR:

MOST MAKE-A-WISH FOUNDATION WISHES GRANTED

Less "weird", more "wowzer", Cena had granted a whopping 650 wishes through the foundation as of 2022. From visiting kids in hospitals to inviting them to his WWE matches, nobody has come close to matching him yet.

DWAYNE JOHNSON

WORLD RECORD FOR:

MOST SELFIES TAKEN IN UNDER THREE MINUTES

The star took 105 fan photos at the London premiere of his action-thriller *San Andreas* in 2015, winning the world record. He has since been usurped, with Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar claiming the title while fittingly promoting his film *Selfiee*.

JACKIE CHAN

WORLD RECORD FOR:

MOST CREDITS IN ONE MOVIE FOR THE SAME PERSON

As well as having performed the most stunts by a living actor (sorry, Cruise), Chan holds the record for 15 credits, on 2012's *Chinese Zodiac*. Alongside the obvious, Chan was also catering coordinator, theme-tune vocalist and gaffer.

WILL SMITH

WORLD RECORD FOR:

MAKING THE MOST PUBLIC APPEARANCES IN 12 HOURS

Manchester! Birmingham! London! These were the MVPs in Will Smith's record-breaking *Hitch* promo tour in 2005 — since beaten by Indian actor Abhishek Bachchan, with seven premieres in a day. Time for that tour of the Isle Of Man, Smith! **BETH WEBB**

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Nick Offerman

THE *SMURFS* STAR ON *SENSEI* TEACHINGS AND THE ULTIMATE TOM

WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

ARNO

What do you do better than anyone else you know?
I'm going to say sweep. I love to sweep the floor in my woodshop. Safety is paramount, and cleanliness is very important to shop safety. And my mom and dad taught me: if you're going to do a job, do it right. So I don't just sweep up to the edge of the rug, I move the rug. I get underneath the furniture. I consider it sort of a holy practice. It's cleaning the altar at which I worship.

Do you have an unusual hobby?
I mean, all of my hobbies — woodworking, canoeing, fishing — feel pretty usual... Oh, here's my unusual hobby: I own part of a Belted Galloway beef herd in the Lake District, and I'm absolutely fascinated with regenerative grazing and sustainable agriculture. I also love to be part of producing the most delicious tomahawk steaks you ever came across.

Sticking with the bovine theme: how much is a pint of milk?
That's a great question. At the moment, things in the States are quite volatile in terms of eggs and dairy. We don't have it by the pint, we have it by the quart, which I believe is two pints, and it's in the neighbourhood of $4 or $5 right now. That's partly why I'm fascinated with regenerative agriculture, because our food system is so broken. We have to pay way too much for food to simply be clean and good for us. The idea that the cheaper the food, the better is a terrible fallacy under which we all suffer at the moment.

What is in your pocket right now?
I'm wearing pyjama bottoms right now. So what is in my pocket is a secret. (*Laughs*) This is a family programme, so I will keep that between me and the good creator, Mother Nature, who made me.

Who is your favourite member of the Fellowship of the Ring?
That's a question which I'm very prepared to answer. Those books were my first escape from my little cultural vacuum of a small Illinois farm town in the '70s. My aunt was a librarian, and those and *The Chronicles Of Narnia* just exploded my world into the realms of creativity. So many characters are ripping through my brain, but the one whom I identified with is Samwise Gamgee, the gardener's son. Partly because I come from a farming family, and because in the epic fantasy of my own life, it is a knowledge of the practical things and a good work ethic that always wins the day over the dark side.

Do you have an irrational fear?
For all my donkey-like tendencies, one of the attributes that I consider to be a great blessing is a very steady disposition. I'm known in my community for my unflappable rationality. I treat everyone with the respect that I would like to be treated [with]. So perhaps my deepest fear, when my eyes pop awake at three in the morning, is that somehow my narcissism or Hollywood solipsism has cast a cloak over my senses and that I'm actually an absolute twat.

Who's the best Tom: Cruise or Hanks?
Oh boy. Those are two very winning Toms. They are both powerfully heroic in their own stead. I'm in the new *Mission: Impossible* movie, and the stuff Tom does in that no-one has ever done, and no-one will ever do again. It's utterly bananas. But Tom Hanks has become quite a purveyor of old-timey typewriters... So at the risk of hurting either of their feelings, because I'm sure both get all of the press briefings of what I put out, I'm going to call it a tie and say Tom Waits is actually the champion Tom in my world.

What's the best advice you've ever been given?
My *sensei* Shozo Sato, who we recently lost at age 91, was very formative in my life. He married Megan [Mullally] and me with a tea ceremony. And among the many pieces of great advice he gave me was this one: always maintain the attitude of a student. So you should always have a project. I've crunched the numbers on this and I can tell you that there is always another sexual position that can be mastered. But whatever course of study it is that delights one, if you maintain the attitude of a student, your life will be happy because you will always be making progress.

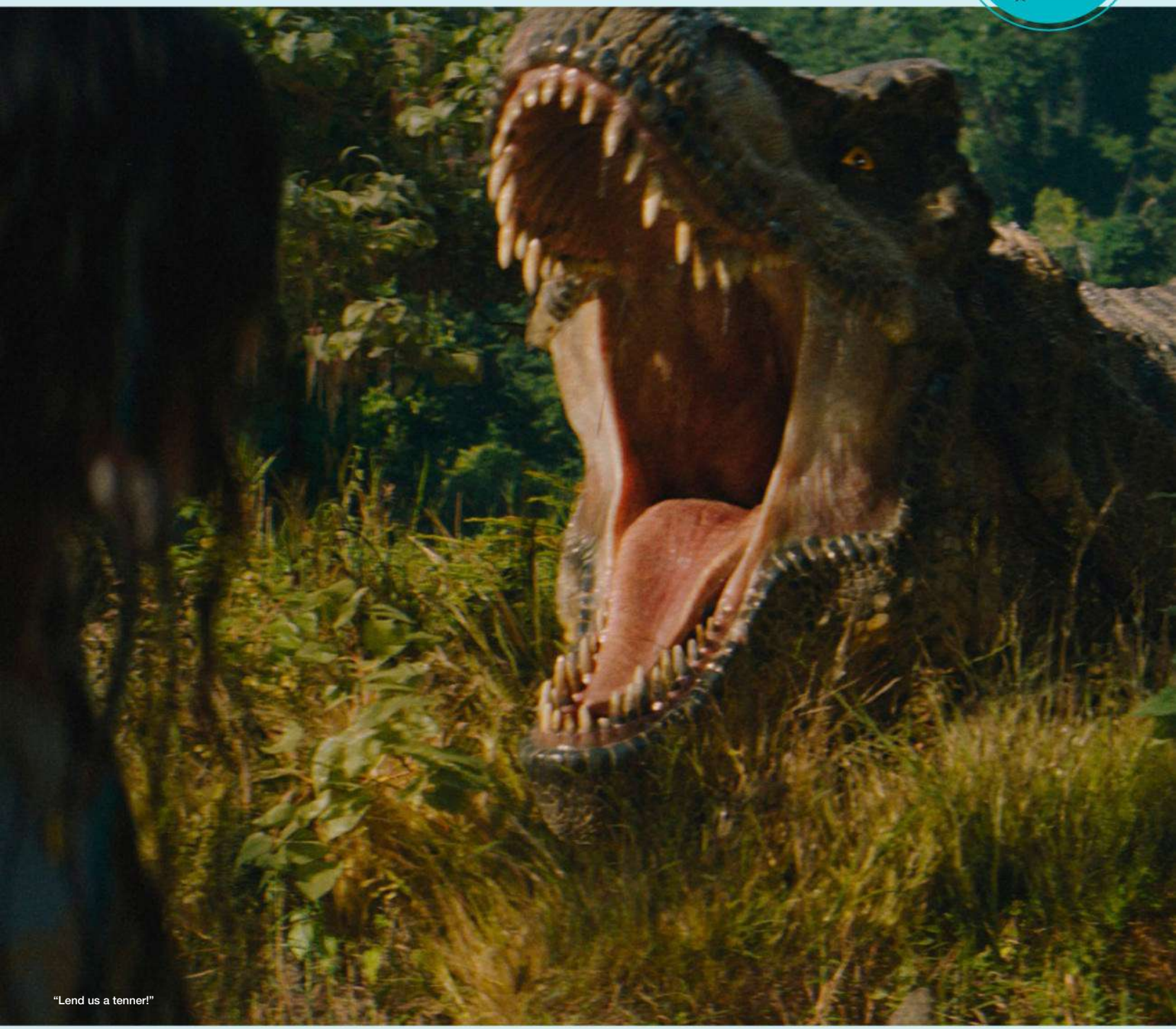
***SMURFS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 18 JULY**

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

4 - 30 JULY 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES



"Lend us a tenner!"

Top to bottom: Flares at the ready; Zora Bennett (Scarlett Johansson) and her team are in for a dino-mite time; Zora pulls some strings.

WATCH FIRST

Glimpsed on the TV during *Jurassic World Rebirth*, 1969's *The Valley Of Gwangi* — about a cowboy (James Franciscus) who captures an Allosaurus called the Gwangi — was the last dinosaur flick animated by stop-motion genius Ray Harryhausen.

FILM

JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH

AN ADVENTURE 65 MILLION (AND 32) YEARS IN THE MAKING

★★★

OUT **2 JULY** / CERT **12A / 133 MINS**

DIRECTOR Gareth Edwards
CAST Scarlett Johansson, Mahershala Ali, Jonathan Bailey, Rupert Friend, Manuel Garcia-Rulfo

PLOT A group, led by specialist Zora (Johansson), are sent to the tropics to draw blood samples from three massive dinosaurs for a groundbreaking, lucrative medical advancement.

EARLY ON IN *Jurassic World Rebirth*, the seventh film in the *Jurassic Park* series, a New York billboard depicting T-Rexes in the wild is being whitewashed, the creatures getting airbrushed — well, roller-painted — out of history. While it's a plot point — we are now in a fictional world rapidly losing interest in dinosaurs — it could also serve as a metaphor for the franchise itself. For, after the Colin Trevorrow era, Gareth Edwards' film is wiping the slate clean. New characters, new species, new mission, new locales, same reliance on the original John Williams theme for instant wonder. The result, despite the fresh start, adds very little that is novel, but emerges a brisk, uneven, mostly enjoyable romp.

For all the new newness, *Rebirth* courses with an infectious love of Spielberg's original. Edwards and original *Jurassic Park* screenwriter David Koepp have lots of fun playing with the staples of the series: jungle treks, breathless chases, close calls, awe at nature's power, ethical discussions, low comedy, a cutesy dino for the Happy Meal crowd, and waving flares to distract behemoths are all present and correct. (What there isn't here is a truly delicious, talk-about kill.) There are also lots of delicate nods — a wing mirror here, a famous banner there — without ever straying into *Alien: Romulus* get-away-from-her-you-bitch egregiousness. Thankfully, Scarlett Johansson never implores anyone to hold on to their butts, or any other part of their anatomy.

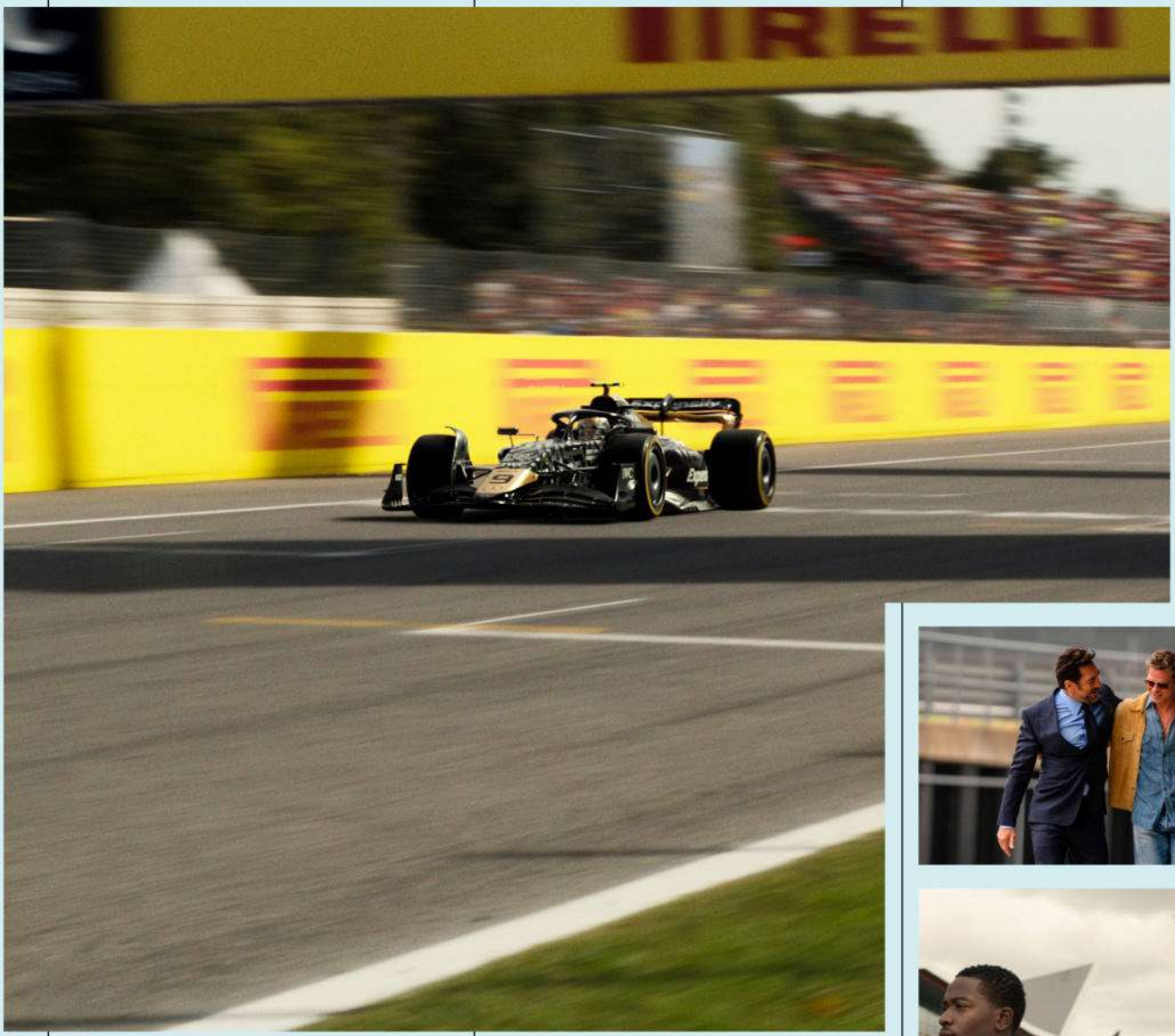
After a tense prologue set 17 years prior, which introduces a laboratory R&D into creating hybrid creatures for the original park that is important later, *Rebirth* shifts into inelegant exposition mode. The salient points are these: Unscrupulous Big Pharma wonk Martin Krebs (Rupert Friend), surely a graduate from the Carter Burke school of Corporate Shithousery, hires Special Ops leader Zora Bennett (Johansson), her right-hand man Duncan Kincaid (Mahershala Ali) and palaeontologist Henry Loomis (Jonathan Bailey) to extract the DNA from the three biggest dinosaurs — the sub-aqua Mosasaurus, the land-locked Titanosaurus, the flying Quetzalcoatlus. Extracted by a nifty DNA-extracting dart thingie, the blood will create a medication for treating heart disease that will save trillions of lives and make millions for Krebs' company. The catch is, the DNA has to come from living animals who have now congregated near the equator line, a tropical locale illegal for humans to enter.

Bennett and Kincaid are more mercenary than dynamic pricing on a stadium gig. Loomis is a nervy science type whose most prominent character-trait is chewing mints loudly. So, to add some human relatability, we also get the Delgado family, sailing from Barbados to Cape Town, who are pulled into the action when their boat comes under attack from Jurassic sharks. There are family tensions at play — dad Reuben (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo) dislikes daughter Teresa's (Luna Blaise) boyfriend Xavier (David Iacano); little Bella (Audrina Miranda) is running out of liquorice — that all get put aside when later chased downstream by a big-ass T-Rex in an exciting set-piece lifted from Crichton's original novel.

The search-for-three-creatures gambit engenders a certain predictability but it guarantees some different flavours. The hunt for the Mosasaurus is an entertaining 20-minute cut-down of *Jaws*' sea hunt — Johansson could well be standing on the bow firing yellow barrels into the prehistoric Bruce. While much of the impact of the original's Brachiosaurus intro was tied into the thrill of new technology, the search for the Titanosaurus is a sterling attempt to deliver an authentic sense of wonder, as Loomis marvels at a pair of nuzzling, horny Titanosaurs who should really get a room. The battle for a Quetzalcoatlus egg is the less effective of the three set-pieces, an abseiling adventure let down by the feeling it is studio-bound.

The characters might not lodge in the memory (MVP: Mahershala Ali lending weight to the shenanigans), but Edwards' filmmaking is consistently on point, crafting a colourful quest full of striking images, some clever staging and an unusual-for-the-series use of pop music (cue Primal Scream and Ben E. King). *Rebirth* is a good time, but perhaps we need new ideas, new hybrids. It might be time to cross-pollinate with other Universal franchises. M3GAN versus robotic Raptors ('M3GAN 3: Oh They Do Move In Packs')? Or A Dilophosaurus versus Vin Diesel ('The Fast And The Poisonous')? Maybe not, but come number eight, the series needs less a rebirth and more a rethink. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT It's not doing much daring or different but this delivers a fun, well-made summer theme-park ride, with fast highs and slow lows. Pleasurable, though it doesn't linger.



Left: Fast, furious, Formula 1. **Below, top to bottom:** APXGP team owner Ruben (Javier Bardem) with racer-for-hire Sonny (Brad Pitt); Damon Idris plays hotshot Joshua.

FILM

F1

TOP GUN: MAVERICK — ON LAND

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **156 MINS**

DIRECTOR Joseph Kosinski
CAST Brad Pitt, Damson Idris, Javier Bardem, Kerry Condon, Tobias Menzies

PLOT The boss of a failing Formula 1 team (Bardem) recruits a maverick former driver (Pitt) in an effort to turn things around.

REMEMBER *TOP GUN: Maverick*? Joseph Kosinski's big-screen triumph of 2022, which saw Tom Cruise and his co-stars *actually* flying in planes? With *F1*, Kosinski returns to capturing vehicular action with a level of commitment never seen before. This time, it's the world's fastest cars, and he's swapped out one megawatt movie star in Cruise for another: Brad Pitt.

Pitt is Sonny Hayes, a grouchy gambler who lives in his van and, after a horrifying accident crushed his dreams, constantly moves from one motorsport to another, addicted to the rush of a race. Old friend Ruben (a charming Javier Bardem), owner of struggling F1 team APXGP, offers Sonny a seat in the hopes of a win — but with negative press, a "shitbox" of a car, and ongoing clashes of ego with talented rookie teammate Joshua Pearce (Damson Idris) to contend with, it's not going to be easy.

The filmmakers make it look easy, though. Every second of racing action in *F1* is truly immersive. Groundbreaking new, smaller IMAX cameras sit on the cars, putting you so close to the track you can practically smell the asphalt. Both Pitt and Idris are genuinely behind the wheel most of the time (of modified Formula 2 cars, but *still*), and shooting at real-life Grands Prix submerges *F1* in total authenticity (complete with cameos from drivers, engineers and more). Lewis Hamilton is a producer, and his input into the script means the twists and turns of each race feel, yes, dramatised, but also totally conceivable. Your heart will pound as Sonny and Joshua fight for a place on the podium, with every move rooted in character as well as spectacle.

While the scenes outside of the race sequences verge on formulaic, the chemistry between Pitt and those around him — especially Idris, Bardem and the excellent Kerry Condon as APXGP's steely technical director, Kate — is strong. Sonny's relentless wise-cracking occasionally wears a little thin, but there are enough moments of vulnerability to balance them out. Idris more than holds his own in what is sure to be a breakout role for him: a striking screen presence, his Joshua manages to be cocky, charming and complex all at once.

For Formula 1 fans, the sheer accuracy of *F1*'s depiction of the sport will be giddy-making; for agnostics, the races may feel a touch repetitive, and the level of detail may go over some heads. But whatever your relationship to the sport, the magnitude of what Kosinski and co have accomplished is undeniable. Fasten your seatbelts, and see this on the biggest screen you possibly can. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT **Joseph Kosinski has done it again. *F1* combines unparalleled access, pioneering filmmaking and moving redemption arcs to deliver an exhilarating cinematic experience. What will he attach a camera to next?**

FILM

THE RITUAL

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **98 MINS**
DIRECTOR David Midell
CAST Al Pacino, Dan Stevens, Ashley Greene, Abigail Cowen

If you're telling a story that involves an old priest, a young priest and a possessed girl and you aren't *The Exorcist*, you have taken on the kind of challenge that would terrify Beelzebub himself. Director David Midell makes a valiant attempt at this fool's errand, even if the result ultimately feels like just another wannabe. Dan Stevens plays the assistant, young Father Joseph Steiger, while Al Pacino is the old priest, Father Theophilus Riesinger, who must exorcise the disturbed Emma (Abigail Cowen). The film can't quite decide whether it believes in demons or not. Stevens offers increasingly horrified reactions while Pacino hams it up, but it could have used a stronger script to play all the angles, and find a way to stand out from the cassocked crowd. **HOH**

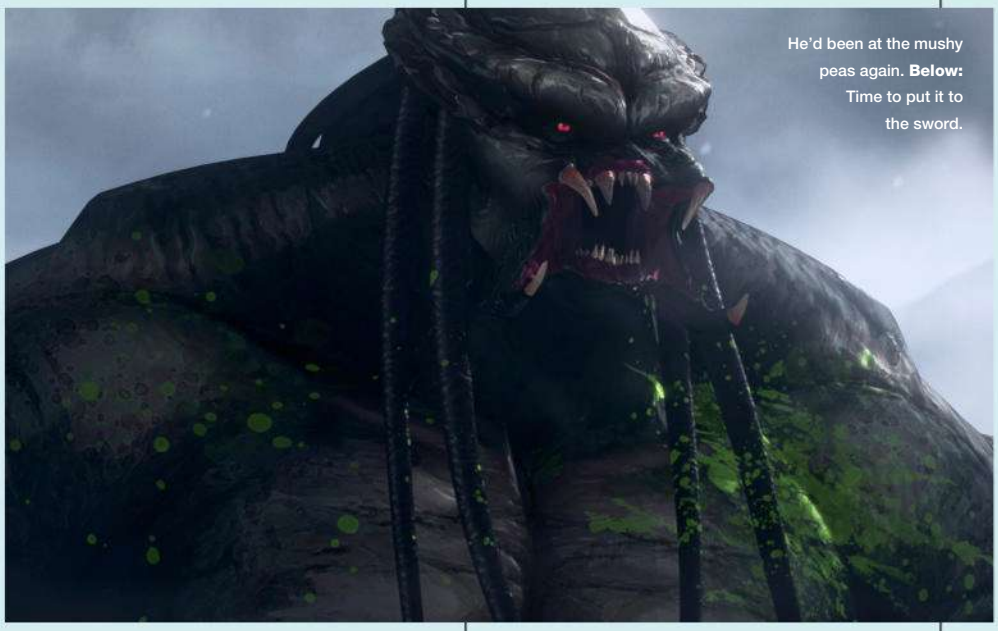
FILM

BALLERINA

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **125 MINS**
DIRECTOR Len Wiseman
CAST Ana de Armas, Anjelica Huston, Keanu Reeves, Ian McShane

Having stolen the show kicking SPECTRE ass in *No Time To Die*, Ana de Armas has shown action-hero promise for years; it's only now, with *John Wick* spin-off *Ballerina*, that that early promise has come into full bloom. Once again, vengeance is the name of the game. with Eve Macarro (de Armas) set on a bloody path when her father is murdered. *Ballerina* is at its best when the bodies are dropping and there is a pleasingly rich amount of variety in *Ballerina*'s action — from flamethrowers to *katana* swords to ice skates. The narrative linking the action together is not quite as sophisticated, and the story generally a bit slight, but it's fun to watch de Armas punch, shoot, stab and blast everything and everyone in her way. **AW**



He'd been at the mushy peas again. **Below:** Time to put it to the sword.

FILM

PREDATOR: KILLER OF KILLERS

IF IT BLEEDS, THEY CAN KILL IT (REPEATEDLY)

★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / CERT **18** / **90 MINS**

DIRECTOR Dan Trachtenberg
CAST Lindsay LaVanchy, Louis Ozawa, Rick Gonzalez, Michael Biehn

PLOT The deadly, trophy-hunting Predator species takes on the toughest warriors from across human history: a Viking queen, a Japanese *ninja*, and an ace World War II pilot.

IT'S HARD TO keep a secret in Hollywood these days. So when it was announced late last year that Dan Trachtenberg had directed not one but two new films in the *Predator* franchise, one completely hush-hush, the surprise was bigger than getting hit in the face with Old Painless. Trachtenberg was behind 2022's *Prey*, arguably the best film in the series since the 1987 Arnie original, and now, it seemed, he was going all in on the demon who makes trophies of men.

Finally, the secret is out. Much like *The Animatrix*, the 2003 tie-in that the Wachowskis released alongside *The Matrix Reloaded*, *Predator: Killer Of Killers* serves as a kind of animated anthology precursor to *Predator: Badlands*, Trachtenberg's next live-action theatrical film, due later this year. It's largely comprised of three stories, following three very different human warriors from across history, each with a different skillset and slant. We begin in 841 AD with a chapter titled 'The Shield', where a fearsome Viking queen (voiced by Lindsay LaVanchy) is seeking bloody vengeance — before a Predator interrupts her quest. Next, we move to 17th-century Japan ('The Sword'), where a ninja (Louis Ozawa) takes on his rival

samurai brother — and also, a Predator. Then we jump to World War II ('The Bullet'), where an ace pilot (Rick Gonzalez) battles in the skies with Nazi fighters and — yes, you guessed it — a Predator. Finally, all three converge for an extraterrestrial battle royale.

Anthology films are not easy to pull off — just ask *Four Rooms* — and while the visual variety of darting between locales and timelines is fun, each segment earns just 20 minutes of runtime (ahead of a 20-minute finale): not much to establish the characters, their pre-existing conflicts *and* a Predator-shaped spanner in the works. Best of the three is 'The Bullet', depicting thrilling brain-over-brawn aerial battles with the beast. 'The Sword' looks beautiful, and there is a certain joy in watching *samurai* swords thwip against the Predator's Japanese-style chain weaponry, but the segment is largely dialogue-free, a disappointing trope for ancient-Asia-set stories, leaving it feeling a bit thin. Opener 'The Shield' feels appropriately savage for this series, the lashings of gore as chaotic as you'd expect.

It's all handsomely rendered, the illustrated-but-in-3D approach to the animation clearly influenced by the likes of *Arcane*, though not always as coherent as you'd hope. The climax is pleasingly hard sci-fi, with bold imagery and some tantalising teases towards the future of the franchise. But that's all this secret film really amounts to: an *amuse-bouche*, for a *Badlands*-shaped main meal yet to come. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT ***Killer Of Killers*** **looks the business and comes with all the gory kills and human heroes you'd hope for, but like most anthologies it is a little hit-and-miss.**

Shakespearean skullduggery: Spike (Alfie Williams) and Dr Kelson (Ralph Fiennes).

FILM

28 YEARS LATER

DANNY BOYLE'S ZOMBIE NATION

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **115 MINS**

DIRECTOR Danny Boyle
CAST Alfie Williams, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Jodie Comer, Ralph Fiennes

PLOT Raised in a survivors' colony on Holy Island, 12-year-old Spike (Williams) takes a rite-of-passage trip to the infection-ravaged English mainland with his dad (Taylor-Johnson).

DANNY BOYLE AND Alex Garland have never made obvious choices. Take 2002's *28 Days Later* in which they — Boyle as director, Garland as screenwriter — revolutionised zombie cinema with sprinting, blood-vomiting hordes. (Okay, *technically* 'infected', not reanimated-corpse zombies). It reinvigorated not just the walking dead, but grand, apocalyptic storytelling in the public consciousness. Over two decades later, end-of-the-world stories are old news — fungal armageddons and civilisation-razing outbreaks are mainstream TV fare. But with *28 Years Later*, Boyle and Garland return (they were largely uninvolved with 2007's *Weeks*) to breathe thrilling life back into an overexposed genre. There isn't an obvious choice in sight.

It begins, for instance, with the Teletubbies; Tinky-Winky crashes into frame. Before you can say, "Big hug!", a gaggle of Scottish children are besieged by rage-infected adults, a horrifying opening flashback drenched in dark humour. From there, we leap — yes — 28 years later, to a British Isles cut off from the outside world. The infected still roam the wilderness. On Lindisfarne, aka Holy Island, lies a survivors' civilisation, attached to the mainland by a causeway only accessible when the tide recedes. There lives 12-year-old Spike (Alfie Williams, an outstanding new talent), a boy who's never been somewhere where he couldn't see the sea. "It's so big," he gasps when his dad Jamie (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) escorts him inland for the first time.

Daring decisions abound. The infected aren't just stark raging mad, but stark naked. Jodie Comer, as Spike's mother Isla, is ill and losing her grip on reality for much of the film, introduced screaming: "Are you trying to kill our fucking baby, you cunt?!" Ralph Fiennes' mysterious Dr Kelson looks like Colonel Kurtz, but speaks more like *Grand Budapest Hotel*'s genteel M. Gustave. It's partially shot on iPhones, aping and updating *Days*' scuzzy digital-camcorder look; kills are captured by bullet-time camera rigs, delivered in jarring multi-angle edits. Where the original was lean and mean, stretches of *Years* are soulful, almost mythical in tone, exploring a post-technological Britain rooted in rural traditionalism.

Boyle and Garland have much on their minds. *28 Years Later* brims with thematic resonances, a canvas on which to illustrate a national identity-crisis. There is a clear Brexit analogy in a country experiencing isolationism — the rage-ravaged Britain secluded from the world; its people secluded from their own land. The distinctly British post-apocalyptic society is part Blitz-spirit wartime-rationing aesthetic, part medieval fortress — Boyle repeatedly cuts to black-and-white World War footage. Is this the nebulous 'good old days' that some Brits yearned for? Is survival inherently regressive? *Years* is also about the stories we tell ourselves, the myth-building that creates a nation, a fiction rather than truth.

Those heady ideas are richly woven, but worn lightly. Worry not: as a pure horror

KEEP 'EM PEELED

In one scene (not the one above), Ralph Fiennes' Dr Kelson holds a skull and references *Hamlet*. Back in 1995, Fiennes won a Tony award for playing Hamlet on Broadway.

Top to bottom: Running for their lives: Jamie (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) and son Spike; An infected on the hunt; Jodie Comer (middle) plays Spike's mum, Isla.

experience, *28 Years Later* is ferocious, fizzing with adrenaline. The mainland thrums with a pervasive sense of immediate danger; when the infected arrive (and boy, do they arrive), it is breathlessly tense. They too, have evolved — there are *I Am Legend*-ish hints that, maybe, the infected are their own civilisation now. And like in *The Last Of Us*, there are several kinds: "fast ones", "slow ones", and most terrifyingly, the hard-as-nails "Alphas", with a Predator-like predilection for ripping spines clean from bodies. The film's opening half, in particular, is phenomenal — an electrifying exercise in terror, amplified by Young Fathers' astonishing score.

Which is to say that the second half doesn't quite grip the throat as tightly. It never bores; every moment brings a discovery. But by design, this is a wild, unruly odyssey, a coming-of-age tale that zigs and zags. It won't satisfy everyone. There are brief moments of dodgy CGI (an unconvincing herd of deer), minor pacing flubs, and Comer's brilliant performance is in service of a character that's tough to get a handle on. With two more films to come, it closes on a cliffhanger.

But this is brave, bold stuff — full-strength Boyle meets undiluted Garland. The 'Lust For Life' beat soundtracking Spike's introduction conjures big *Trainspotting* energy; Garland's metaphysical *Annihilation* and folkloric *Men* are felt throughout. And still, it's pure *28* — the sequel the original deserves, culminating in a bonkers final minute set to be the most divisive ending of 2025; the most un-obvious choice in a film full of them. We're blessed to receive it. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT The sequel we needed is both the film you expect, and the one you don't. There's blood, but also real guts and brain and heart — visceral cinema soaked in viscera.

Here: International relations goes high-octane. Below: Jack Quaid has a blast.

FILM

HEADS OF STATE

TALK ABOUT A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

★★★★

OUT **NOW (PRIME VIDEO)** / CERT **TBC / 113 MINS**

DIRECTOR Ilya Naishuller
CAST Idris Elba, John Cena, Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Carla Gugino, Jack Quaid, Paddy Considine

PLOT A British Prime Minister (Elba) and a US President (Cena) are forced to put their differences aside when they become the targets of a terrorist.

REMOVE A FEW mobile phones and gadgets and *Heads Of State* could believably be a relic of the 1980s. And that is absolutely its greatest strength. An old-school mismatched-buddy movie with apparently no ambitions other than to be a thoroughly fun time, it hits that rare undemanding-but-entertaining sweet spot that so many modern action-comedies miss.

Early on, you might wonder if it's misjudged its tone. The opening sequence, in which an undercover sting to apprehend a miscellaneous bad guy (Paddy Considine) goes fatally wrong, comes off like a cut-price *Mission: Impossible*. Then there's the slightly stiff introduction of two clashing world leaders: long-serving UK Prime Minister Sam Clarke (Idris Elba), whose slumping popularity has put him in a persistent grump, and newly elected US President Will Derringer (John Cena), a former action-movie star who sees little difference between being a scripted hero and a real one. There's a bit of awkwardness to their early scenes, with Cena's big, broad performance not quite gelling with Elba's huffy delivery.

Thankfully, something soon clicks. Starting with a sequence in which Air Force One is shot down, stranding Clarke and Derringer in the Belarusian wilderness, a sense of enthusiastic

silliness grows. Clarke becomes the competent survivalist, drawing on old SAS training, while Derringer tries to apply his Hollywood training to real life. He discovers choreographed fight moves won't get you through a real punch-up and a gun fight is a little more complicated when your enemy is firing real bullets. Cena is always good value playing characters with minimal self-awareness (see also: *Peacemaker, Blockers,* his brief cameo in *Barbie*), and Elba gets some strong laughs as the straighter character, rolling his eyes at the blowhard American.

The daftness keeps building as the film progresses, until in the final act it seems to be pushing the limits of just how far it can stretch credulity. It starts winkingly referencing its own clichés and the action gets crazier. It all culminates in a truly bonkers car chase that tests the boundaries of logic, physics and the feasible athleticism of middle-aged men.

After the uncertain start, director Ilya Naishuller (who has a solid track record for outlandish action-comedies with the likes of *Hardcore Henry* and *Nobody*) develops a strong handle on the tone, building the absurdity gradually, so it never lurches. He piles up touches of goofiness bit by bit, like a game of Buckaroo!, careful never to do too much too quickly and send the whole thing skittering. By the time it reaches its highly improbable conclusion, you could reasonably be rolling your eyes at how mad it all is, but you'll probably be having such a blast that you won't feel any need to. **OLLY RICHARDS**

VERDICT A really good, dumb comedy can be a joyous thing, and this is a really good, dumb comedy.

Here: Not your average doll's house. **Below:** Lee Jung-jae as Gi-hun.

TV

SQUID GAME: SEASON 3

THE NETFLIX MEGAHIT GOES OUT WITH A BANG

★★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / EPISODES VIEWED **5 OF 6**

SHOWRUNNER Hwang Dong-hyuk
CAST Lee Jung-jae, Lee Byung-hun, Wi Ha-joon, Im Si-wan, Kang Ha-neul, Park Gyu-young, Park Sung-hoon

PLOT Gi-hun (Lee) and his fellow survivors are forced to continue playing after their uprising fails, but help is on the way from some unlikely places.

SQUID GAME GALLOPED out of the blocks when it premiered in 2021. Right off the bat, we saw the drowning-in-debt Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae) coerced into a deadly game of Red Light/Green Light, with the first season massacring contestants in almost every episode, folding in organ-harvesting, sadistic gold-masked billionaire patrons, and one of the worst hair makeovers imaginable. Now in its third and final season, the South Korean dystopian sensation remains entirely written and directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk, and stands as a testament to an astonishing talent and work ethic that infamously saw the creator lose ten teeth across the production due to stress.

Dental sacrifices aside, what he's created is nothing short of miraculous: an internationally adored show, at once thrilling, gorgeous, and satirically astute. Much like Gi-hun knowing how to play Red Light/Green Light, nailing *Squid Game* comes from knowing when to tear ahead and when to slow the hell down. This playing with pace can be detrimental but largely works to the show's advantage in its final run. The nauseatingly tense Episode 2 plays out in real time and, unlike in the first season, we've had ample time to come to love

some of the remaining players — mother-and-son Geum-ja (Kang Ae-sim) and Yong-sik (Yang Dong-geun), and trans former soldier Hyun-ju (Park Sung-hoon) — as well as detest others enough to root for a brutal comeuppance.

This thirst for brutality extends to the games. There is, it has to be said, a frustrating lack of consistency when it comes to human biology in this show: some characters shake off seemingly devastating physical events, while others fatally succumb to mere flesh wounds. But at the apex of a stunning performance from Lee Jung-jae, Gi-hun grounds the series' tragic core, while the games themselves retain a childish glee that makes the juxtaposition with the savagery all the more disturbing. As the number of players dwindles, those that remain are increasingly corrupted into monstrous, sadistic capitalists, no longer distinct from those gold-masked patrons egging them on.

But the most complex and compelling dynamic remains that between Gi-hun and Lee Byung-hun's Front Man. Both were irreparably transformed by winning the games, and the Front Man both loves and loathes Gi-hun for retaining a humanity that has since eluded him.

Squid Game will go down as one of the darkest and most gripping shows on Netflix, one that didn't overstay its welcome and went out with a bang. Even if Hwang's teeth didn't all last the journey, viewers will be glad that they did. **LEILA LATIF**

VERDICT **This epic dystopian tale's final chapter retains the qualities that made it a global behemoth. Its poptastic visuals, perfectly pitched performances and cruel twists are a wild ride worth staying seated for.**

FILM

TORNADO

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **91 MINS**
DIRECTOR John Maclean
CAST Kōki, Tim Roth, Jack Lowden, Takehiro Hira

John Maclean's acclaimed 2015 *Slow West* took a Scotsman to the American West; with *Tornado*, Maclean takes the Western to Scotland. This is an evocative portrait of 1790s Scotland, brought to life by Robbie Ryan's rich cinematography. Japanese pop star Kōki plays Tornado, a samurai-in-training who crosses paths with a criminal gang led by Sugarman (Tim Roth) — which leads to a blood-drenched fight for survival. This is something of a slow burn, a film that requires patience before it finally reaches fever-pitch in the final act. Balancing multiple genres, the occasional pacing issues are countered by Jed Kurzel's score, Ryan's haunting photography, and standout turns from Kōki and Roth. **BL**

FILM

ECHO VALLEY

★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / CERT **TBC** / **103 MINS**
DIRECTOR Michael Pearce
CAST Julianne Moore, Sydney Sweeney, Domhnall Gleeson, Kyle MacLachan

Director Michael Pearce (*Beast, Encounters*) continues his run of eliciting excellent performances from top actors. This time, he tackles the story of grief-stricken Kate (Julianne Moore) and the malign influence of estranged drug-addict daughter Claire (Sydney Sweeney). Pearce smartly lays the groundwork for an addiction drama, before switching gears into thriller territory when Claire's villainous friend — or, perhaps, just dealer — Jackie (Domhnall Gleeson) shows up. Some unlikely plot contrivances and repeated product placements feel a little galling, but for the most part this is an intelligent, sapphic-tinged and well-acted rural thriller, with Moore, Sweeney, and Gleeson all on fine form. **LT**

Grief gets an upgrade.

FILM

THE SHROUDS

DAVID CRONENBERG IS THINKING ABOUT DEATH

★★★★

OUT **4 JULY** / CERT **15** / **119 MINS**

DIRECTOR David Cronenberg
CAST Diane Kruger, Vincent Cassel, Guy Pearce, Sandrine Holt

PLOT A grieving tech pioneer (Cassel) is drawn into a conspiracy after his grave live-streaming software is hacked and his cemetery vandalised.

"YOU'VE MADE A career out of bodies," says Terry (Diane Kruger) to her brother-in-law Karsh (Vincent Cassel), a widower hollowed out by his wife Becca's (also Diane Kruger) death. This line will raise a smile for anyone even slightly familiar with the films of writer and director David Cronenberg, whose oeuvre, from *The Fly* to *Crimes Of The Future*, has always been profoundly concerned with matters of the flesh.

In this latest complex and captivating outing, the master of the macabre ruminates on bodily transformation in relation to sex, death and technology, from an especially personal perspective while maintaining characteristic gallows humour. ("Grief is rotting your teeth," a dentist blankly informs Karsh in the opening scene.)

Karsh is the CEO of GraveTech, which allows mourners to view a live feed of their loved one's decaying corpse via a screen on their gravestone, made possible by burial shrouds embedded with cameras. "It's encrypted," Karsh smiles at an amusingly unsettled first date. "Pun intended." GraveTech's expansion is threatened by mysterious vandalism of some of the graves in Karsh's cemetery, including Becca's, and a hack that interrupts the shrouds' video feeds, leading him down a path of obsession and subterfuge. Has Becca's body been tampered with by a business rival, Icelandic activists or the Chinese government? And could it be connected to the intrusive experimental cancer treatment she underwent?

Aided by Terry, Becca's neurotic identical twin sister, her nerdy ex-husband Maury (Guy Pearce), and a flirtatious AI assistant (Kruger again), Karsh attempts to uncover the truth in a coldly futuristic Toronto. All the while, Becca appears in dreams that are at once erotic, disturbing and deeply sad, her body increasingly mutilated as her cancer metastasises.

Cronenberg makes no attempt to disguise the fact that *The Shrouds* is autobiographical. The film was inspired by his experience of grieving his own wife, and Karsh, a white-haired former filmmaker, is styled exactly like Cronenberg himself. But this is no cathartic therapy session or earnest conspiracy thriller; the film seems more concerned with exposing the fallacy that technology can overcome mortality, or that death carries any inherent meaning.

Any new Cronenberg film is cause for excitement, but this feels like the defining work of his late career. As absorbing as it is intellectually rigorous, and as morbidly funny as it is strangely sexy, it's bolstered by great central performances, all uncannily off-kilter. It could be too cerebral for body-horror devotees, but give it a chance and it might just crawl right under your skin. **LAURA VENNING**

VERDICT ***The Shrouds*** **certainly fits neatly into Cronenberg's filmography but stands apart as his most intimate work. It's a hypnotic descent into the darkness of grief, punctuated by perverse Cronenbergian pleasures.**

BOOKS

IT USED TO BE WITCHES

QUEER CINEMA GETS A UNIQUE CHRONICLE

★★★★★

AUTHOR **RYAN GILBEY**

THERE HAVE BEEN many great books on queer cinema. But there has never been a book quite like *It Used To Be Witches*. Written by Ryan Gilbey, a longtime film critic for *The New Statesman* and *The Guardian*, it is a surprising and compelling witches'-brew of analysis, criticism, interviews and history — both personal and cinematic.

Few film books are this original. Borrowing the techniques of films he covers, Gilbey blends meta-commentary and memoir — he himself came out twice, once as a teenager and again at 41 — into a rigorous cinematic compendium. He begins in the third person, and describes himself writing the introduction to his own book, breaking fourth walls with aplomb. ("I will need to delete the preceding paragraphs from my final draft," he writes wryly at one point.)

This kind of formal experimentation can be found in many of the queer films discussed here, especially in the likes of 1996's *The Watermelon Woman*, the first feature directed by an out Black lesbian, which "acknowledged the artifice of its own conception". Its director, Cheryl Dunye, one of many interviewees for the book, talks about the "magic of subversion", and throughout the book Gilbey makes a powerful argument that the most authentic queer cinema is made with an "outlaw spirit". Chantel Akerman's 1974 erotic drama *Je Tu Il Elle*, he notes, was largely funded from stolen money and shot on purloined 35mm film — "an outlaw film down to its last sprocket".

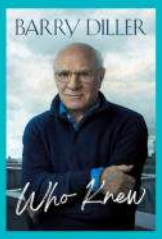
2016's *Moonlight* under the microscope.

Definitions can be slippery, but Gilbey makes a strong case: Todd Haynes' 1995 drama *Safe*, for example, has no gay characters, but its "denial of specific pleasures" and "rejection of convention" is "fastidiously queer". Meanwhile, Nicholas Stoller's 2022 romcom *Bros* features almost exclusively LGBTQ+ characters, "yet nothing about its form feels queer", borrowing as it does a more straight-coded template.

Gilbey is gently scathing on the highest-grossing mainstream films with queer characters — *Philadelphia*, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Brokeback Mountain* — which "all happen to have been directed by straight men". Even the acclaimed likes of *Moonlight* and *Call Me By Your Name* have debatable merits here: too safe, too chaste, too palatable for straight audiences. "Queerness is a mechanism for destruction," he argues.

With its deep wells of obscure references, thoughtful commentary, and arch, horny wit, *It Used To Be Witches* is an absorbing, illuminating, unpredictable, and often moving read. Queer cinema, Gilbey reflects, taught him "how to be queer myself. Or rather, it has revealed that the options are infinite." **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT A rich and deeply curious exploration of queer identity through films — as well as a more intimate exploration of one man's own identity, and how films helped shape it.



WHO KNEW

★★★★

AUTHOR **BARRY DILLER**

This memoir of movie mogul Barry Diller would make a juicy movie itself. It's mostly Diller-killer, little Diller-filler, as he dishes on enemies, unloads on famous names (George Lucas is a "sanctimonious hypocrite") and reveals which film set was most awash with cocaine (Robert Altman's *Popeye*). It loses some propulsion as he moves on to tech-orientated pastures, but throughout, Diller spins one hell of an A-list yarn. **NDS**

THE MOVIE LOVER'S QUIZ BOOK

★★★

AUTHOR **GARY WIGGLESWORTH**

There's hardly a shortage of quiz books for film fans, but there's something straightforwardly satisfying about this entry. With nearly 1,000 questions of varying levels of difficulty and formats (anagrams, picture rounds, multiple choice, release-date orders, guess-the-film-from-the-scathing-review), it doesn't reinvent any quiz-wheels, but will keep bored movie nerds nicely occupied for an hour or so. **JN**

REMEMBERING FORGOTTEN SILVER

★★★★

AUTHOR **COSTA BOTES**

Whether or not you've seen *Forgotten Silver*, Costa Botes and Peter Jackson's infamous 1995 mockumentary about fictitious Kiwi filmmaker Colin McKenzie, this lively chronicle of the "docofib"'s production and ensuing controversy makes fascinating reading. Drawing on a combination of eye-opening new interviews and vivid personal recollections, Botes' book proves the truth really is stranger than (fake non-)fiction. **JK**

"Fire away."

TV

SMOKE

WILL THIS NEW APPLE TV+ SHOW GET IN YOUR EYES?

★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **9 OF 9**

SHOWRUNNER Dennis Lehane
CAST Taron Egerton, Jurnee Smollett, Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine, Greg Kinnear, Rafe Spall, John Leguizamo

PLOT Arson investigator Dave (Egerton) and troubled police detective Michelle (Smollett) work together to track down two prolific arsonists — but not all is as it seems.

IF YOU'VE EVER found yourself needing a reminder to not leave a candle unattended, then Apple TV+ has the show for you: *Smoke*, a new thriller series that sees creator Dennis Lehane (*Shutter Island*) re-team with star and executive producer Taron Egerton, after their previous prison drama for the streamer, *Black Bird*.

Egerton is Dave Gudsen: a gum-chewing former firefighter, current arson investigator and aspiring fiction author, forced to pair up with Jurnee Smollett's detective Michelle Calderone to catch two serial arsonists causing chaos in his jurisdiction. As they track down the twisted firestarters, personal secrets start to bleed over into their work, and their suspicions increasingly turn towards each other.

Egerton is a curious choice in this role, watchable as ever but feeling miscast at times (though, as is ultimately revealed, there's a reason for that). He almost disappears, his usual leading-man charm replaced by a distinctly *off* vibe; Dave is likeable on the face of it, but every try-hard joke and forced smile hints at something more disturbing below the surface. Dave's dictations of his novel are heard via voiceover: based on his own experiences, it's a cringeworthy attempt to rewrite his own narrative, sparking surreal, dreamlike sequences as we gain more insight into Dave's state of mind.

Smollett makes a good match for him. Her Calderone verges into hard-boiled cop stereotypes at times, but is otherwise a perfect balance of turbulent emotion and steely determination. But the MVP, without a doubt, is Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine as 'Milk Jug' arsonist Freddy Fasano. He is quiet and unassuming, his soft, strangled voice giving the impression he is rarely spoken to, and almost every second that he's on screen — even when he's trying to assimilate with those around him — is chilling and uncomfortable. While it's not the core of the show, his thread is often the most intriguing.

Smoke starts off quite grounded, using hypnotic visuals and some stark prosthetics to communicate the beauty and horror of fire itself — flames licking across a ceiling, glowing ashes falling like hot amber snowflakes, the skin sliding off a woman's arm as she escapes from a burning supermarket. But as it goes on, it progresses into more pulpy territory, making for a somewhat jarring tonal mishmash. There is darkness throughout — in Calderone's traumatic backstory, the bleakness of Freddy's everyday life, and the hints at sexual violence — but there's also silliness, mostly from John Leguizamo's sleazy ex-cop Esposito, and plenty of clunky, clichéd dialogue. Despite that uneven feel (or, maybe, because of it?) this show knows how to surprise you, and its cliffhanger episode endings will keep you coming back for more. Just make sure you blow that candle out before bed. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT **More a slow burn than an all-out blaze of glory, *Smoke* may not set your world alight — but has enough twists, turns and outright weirdness to keep you entertained.**

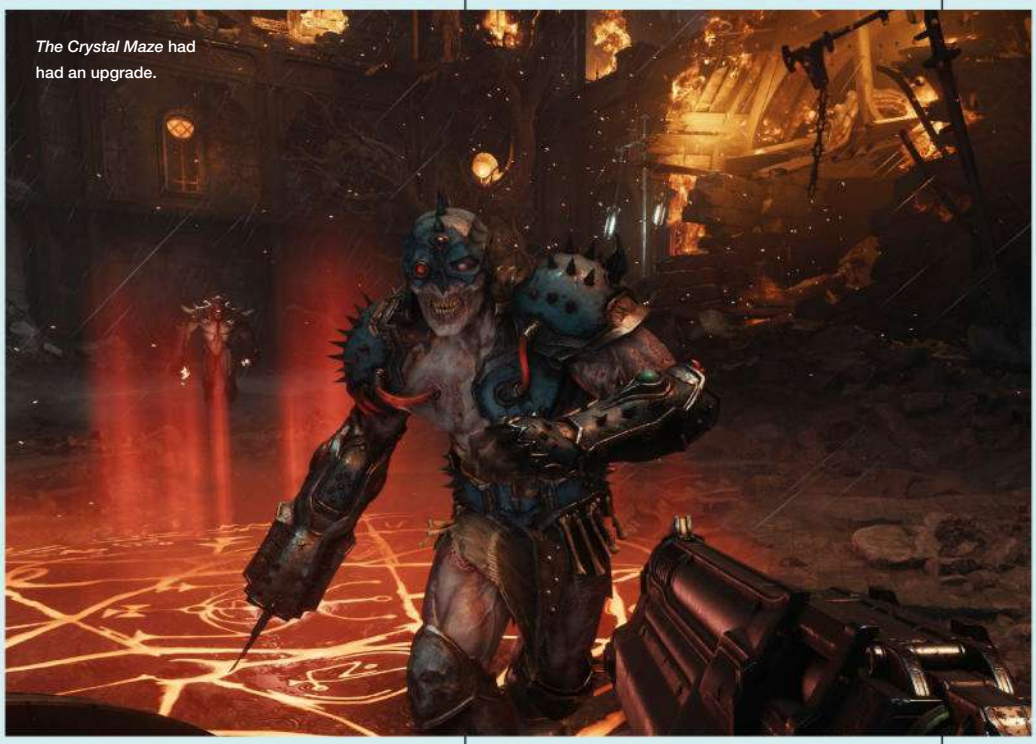
GAMES

DOOM: THE DARK AGES

TIME TO CONFRONT YOUR DEMONS

★★★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S



The Crystal Maze had had an upgrade.

SQUINT A LITTLE during *Doom: The Dark Ages*' first mission, and you could almost be fooled into believing you're playing a first-person, fantasy role-playing game. As you storm a medieval castle engulfed in flames, you'll spy dragons flying overhead, hear church bells clanging in the distance, and watch the evening sky fill with flocks of cawing ravens.

By the time you reach a towering, offshore demon that needs to be dealt with, you might expect to do so by blasting it with ballista bolts. Of course, once you find yourself pelting the enormous beast with plasma fire instead from behind a science-fiction-flavoured turret, you swiftly realise you're indeed back in the Doom Slayer's chunky boots.

But *The Dark Ages*' welcome, intoxicating mix of fantasy and sci-fi elements isn't even the biggest — or best — thing that separates it from its immediate predecessors, *Doom* and *Doom Eternal*. No, that honour goes to its incredibly satisfying, but drastically different gameplay dynamic. While this prequel retains the series' signature rip-and-tear combat and obscenely over-the-top action, it ditches the peppy run-and-gun cadence and fast-paced platforming of the previous two entries. Instead, id Software's latest gore-soaked shooter is weightier and more grounded in ways that somehow feel like a perfect evolution for the franchise.

The hellspawn-hating protagonist is still pretty quick on his feet, though he's traded his double-jump and dash moves for the ability to reduce demons to hamburger from behind a beefy shield. No mere medieval buckler, the new weapon — which is quickly enhanced with a buzzing saw blade — is brimming with both defensive and offensive capabilities. In addition to absorbing damage, it can deflect projectiles, propel you toward baddies with a devastating bash, and halve hell's minions from across the battlefield.

And as with the rest of the hulking hero's varied, upgradable death-dealers, it's seemingly always evolving. Long after the shield has made Captain America's vibranium companion look like a glorified cosplay accessory, it continues to get better. By the time you're embedding its razor-sharp teeth into a baddie's mid-section — then raining death on nearby enemies by firing bullets into its spinning blade — you'll wonder how you ever survived the underworld without it.

But *The Dark Ages* is so much more than a cool, new shield and fresh, fantasy/sci-fi setting. It has bigger maps filled with more enemies, deeper storytelling (involving a demon prince, and the humans' mistreatment of the Slayer as a walking WMD), a banging soundtrack, and secrets aplenty. Toss in a retina-searing visual presentation and incredibly immersive audio design, and *Doom*'s latest invitation to defeat hell's uglies is the series' best entry yet. **MATT CABRAL**

VERDICT Inviting you to rampage through the unholy hordes with wild abandon, this is a thumb-blistering, smile-inducing Satanic shooter that's hard to beat.

TO A T

★★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES S/X

From the moment a giraffe bursts into song, it's clear that *To A T* is going to be a unique experience. This charming slice of video-game surrealism embraces restriction: your character is stuck in a T shape, it uses fixed camera angles, and levels are deliberately clunky as you attempt everyday actions like eating cereal. The result is a funny, if mechanically awkward, story of self-acceptance. **KC**

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. LEGENDS OF THE ZONE TRILOGY

★★★

PS4, XBOX ONE, SWITCH, XBOX SERIES S/X

This compilation glow-up of 2007's *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chornobyl* and its two expansions might have a fresh lick of paint, but it's a noughties title through-and-through. Get past the marionette characters and janky interface, though, and the bleak, survival-horror gameplay has lost little of its bite, daring you to tough it out in the mutant-packed, radiation-soaked quarantine zone. **JD**

ELDEN RING NIGHTREIGN

★★★★

PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES S/X

Beautiful but brutal action RPG *Elden Ring* goes multiplayer with this spin-off. Rather than exploring a stunning open world steeped in lore, *Nightreign* sees groups of three players racing across an ever-shrinking battlefield, before throwing them into desperate combat against savage bosses. With eight character classes to master and razor-sharp content, this series is a dark delight. **MK**

Space is ace: Elio (Yonas Kibreab) and best friend Glordon (Remy Edgerly).

KILLER QUOTE

"I ate my mother at birth. In moments of great success, I regret it."
GRIGON (BRAD GARRETT)

FILM

ELIO

PIXAR GOES TO A DIFFERENT INFINITY AND BEYOND

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG** / **98 MINS**

DIRECTORS Madeline Sharafian, Domee Shi, Adrian Molina
CAST Yonas Kibreab, Zoe Saldaña, Remy Edgerly, Brad Garrett, Jameela Jamil, Shirley Henderson

PLOT Lonely orphan Elio (Kibreab) is mistaken for the leader of Earth and abducted by friendly aliens seeking intergalactic friendship.

PIXAR HAS HAD a few creative wobbles over the past few years. Its biggest successes recently have been sequels: *Inside Out 2* broke box-office records while their last original film, *Elemental*, hardly set the world alight. Thank goodness, then, for *Elio*. Helmed by a trio of co-directors — Domee Shi (*Turning Red*), Madeline Sharafian and Adrian Molina (*Coco*) — it's a vivid, sweet but not saccharine voyage of discovery that proves Pixar is still capable of imagination, even if it still has plenty more sequels in the pipeline.

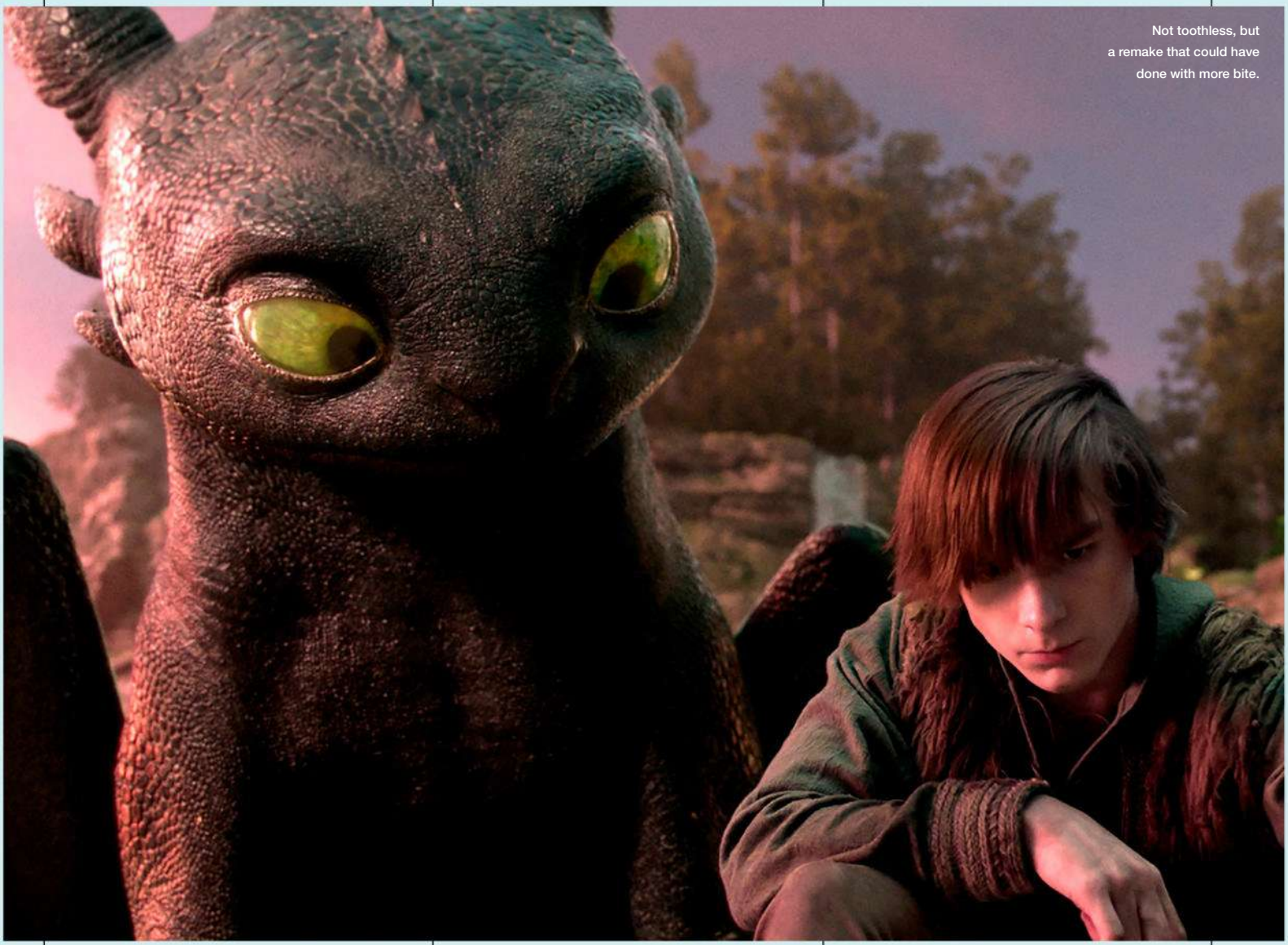
We actually start with some formulaic narrative beats, with 11-year-old Elio Solis (newcomer Yonas Kibreab) grieving the loss of his parents and now living with his well-meaning but overworked aunt Olga (Zoe Saldaña) on an Air Force base. Of course, many of the very best children's stories follow orphans' search for belonging, but another of Pixar's blatant attempts to yank on the heartstrings is a little off-putting initially.

Things pick up when oddball Elio, desperate to be contacted by aliens and escape his lonely life on Earth, eventually manages to transmit a message, signing off with, "Okay, bye, love you!" He's soon beamed up into the Communiverse, an inter-planetary UN with representatives from all across the galaxy. Trouble is, he's been mistaken for the leader of Earth, and must negotiate with warlord Grigon (Brad Garrett) to earn the right to stay in the only place where he feels he belongs.

As dry as all this political bargaining might sound, the Communiverse is absolutely spectacular, a psychedelic, utopian vision of colour and light. The alien design is a treat too, with every background character an opportunity for Pixar's artists to flex their creative muscles (the creature that communicates by plopping out green orbs is a highlight). But a real star is born in Glordon (Remy Edgerly), Grigon's soft-hearted son, who resembles a much cuddlier and funnier Creeper from *Mickey 17,* and soon becomes Elio's best friend. He's enormously adorable even without the giant eyes typical of animated characters. Their connection feels genuine, with both of them able to share their feelings of isolation and the pressure of parental expectations.

Despite its tight runtime, *Elio* also manages to take time to marvel at the very real wonder of space exploration. As he gazes into the night sky, Elio listens to snippets of legendary astronomer Carl Sagan, emphasising the fundamental human need to know we're not alone, whether that's across the universe or on the planet we live on. **LAURA VENNING**

VERDICT Robert Zemeckis' *Contact* for kids. A slow start gives way to a charming, visually inventive adventure that might just inspire a new generation of astronomers to look to the skies.



Not toothless, but a remake that could have done with more bite.

FILM

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

HERE BE LIVE-ACTION REMAKES

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG** / **125 MINS**

DIRECTOR Dean DeBlois
CAST Mason Thames, Nico Parker, Gerard Butler, Nick Frost, Julian Dennison, Gabriel Howell, Peter Serafinowicz

PLOT On the island of Berk, dragon-slaying is a way of life, although not for hopeless young Hiccup (Thames). Until he shoots down a rare Night Fury...

2010'S ANIMATED *HOW To Train Your Dragon* boasts a fun, sparky script and an unimprovable story about a lonely, damaged boy bonding with a lonely, injured dragon. This remake has, therefore, largely decided not to improve it, playing out a near-identical script with live human actors and calling it a day. It's the Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* of animation remakes. It is frequently soaring and gorgeous, but can't take full credit for its beautiful moments because we've quite literally seen it before.

How to judge a remix, an echo? Maybe returning director Dean DeBlois, returning composer John Powell and returning star Gerard Butler have fixed some tiny details that always bugged them or added something in that they missed first time, but it's not always evident what. This adds some tiny wrinkles — a little more backstory for Nico Parker's star dragon-slayer-in-training Astrid; the idea that the people of Berk are an international dragon task force merely led by the Vikings (though in that case why are the leads, aside from Parker, also so pale?) — but none fundamentally change much of what happens.

That said, the individual elements are fine. Mason Thames makes a good Hiccup, the hapless Viking who can't kill an injured dragon and so befriends it, and learns from it, instead. Toothless the dragon remains, thankfully, irresistible, and his bond with Hiccup will make you cry. Butler, who voiced Stoick before, is full of heart as the dad who can't express his feelings. And Nico Parker is an excellent Astrid, given more to do than ever.

Where this is different, it doesn't necessarily feel *better*. The actors generally do great work for humans but don't truly outplay the wildly expressive characters of the original. Cinematographer Bill Pope brings the island to glorious life (though why is it the same cartoonish shape?), but he's up against the memory of Roger Deakins using all the possibilities of a CG world.

Not to harp on, but remakes used to try to add to or alter something in the original: the gender swap of *His Girl Friday*; the '80s Miami excess of *Scarface*; even the more restrained flourishes of Kenneth Branagh's *Cinderella* compared to the Disney original. This one just tries to do the same thing again, and while it does it well — while it can't *help* but do it well, given how much everyone involved in this obviously loves the original — that's all it does. Given the animated film so heavily adapted the Cressida Cowell books on which it was based, you'd think the makers of this new version could have played a little looser with the source and really let themselves fly. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT It's clearly made with real love and care, but shows far too much deference to its progenitor. Even in a remake, we need more originality and less playing the hits.

"Now, here's a real fun-guy..." **Below:** Drumming up the laughs.

FILM

FRIENDSHIP

JAY-FROM-*INBETWEENERS* VOICE: "OOOOH, FRIEEEEEEND!"

★★★★

OUT **18 JULY** / CERT **15** / **101 MINS**

DIRECTOR Andrew DeYoung
CAST Tim Robinson, Paul Rudd, Kate Mara, Jack Dylan Grazer, Josh Segarra

PLOT Craig (Robinson) becomes enamoured with his new neighbour Austin (Rudd). But when Austin breaks off their friendship, Craig spirals.

FRIENDSHIP IS THE kind of film that will likely cause a physical reaction when watching: uncomfortably curled up into a ball, head in your hands, peering between your fingers when you feel brave enough. This is cringe comedy through and through, destined to have audiences squirming in their seats as if everyone arrived at the cinema in trousers a size too small — but Andrew DeYoung's film is hilarious precisely because it is so gleefully deranged, taking full advantage of the well-established comedic powers of Tim Robinson.

DeYoung wrote the leading part of lonely dad Craig specifically for Robinson, and it's impossible to imagine any other actor embodying this character, considering how well the film taps into his singular brand of awkward humour. Fans of Robinson's cult Netflix sketch-comedy series *I Think You Should Leave* will know what his type is: strange men who explode when confronted with their inability to follow the unspoken code of social situations, who respond to conflict with increasingly absurd solutions.

Craig is one of these men, though his life seems pleasant enough at first. He has a corporate job developing "habit-forming" apps and tries his best to bond with his teenage son. ("There's a new Marvel out that's meant to be nuts!" he offers at one point.) But it's clear something is missing in his life, something that will get him off the couch that he sits on every night. He's lonely, and adult friendships are not easy. When new-to-the-neighbourhood, charismatic local weatherman Austin (an outstanding Paul Rudd) takes Craig out on a night-time adventure, he imagines his life turning around for the better. "I can see the future," he says. "It's full of pals."

But the beauty of *Friendship* is that Austin isn't some infallible, unattainable god — he's just another normal guy. Craig is enamoured with the artefacts Austin collects and the band he plays in, but fails to notice how frequently he is hazed by his newsroom colleagues. A surprise reveal that's too good to spoil truly shatters any illusion of Austin's coolness, and yet Craig worships him all the same.

When Austin admits he wants to end their friendship (in the most brutal bromance break-up since *The Banshees Of Inisherin*), Craig's desperate attempts to hold on to their connection escalate in typical Robinson fashion: through loud, embarrassing declarations and woefully misguided attempts to seek approval. The gag-per-minute rate is innumerable. There's a ridiculous side quest involving the most anti-climactic drug-trip of all time, a heavy dose of tumbling through glass doors, and so many instantly memorable lines that *Friendship* will inevitably be quoted for years to come.

IANA MURRAY

VERDICT **This zany debut dials up the cringe comedy to its most excruciating extremes — and it's a riot. Andrew DeYoung and Tim Robinson are a match made in heaven.**

also out

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STICK

★★★ TV

"Owen Wilson is capable of all the shades the character needs. You sense, in fact, that the writing somewhat coasts on his well-formed charms; had this featured another actor in the role, it might not have been nearly as compelling." **JOHN NUGENT**

CLOWN IN A CORNFIELD

★★★ FILM

"It's possible that the plot does not, ultimately, make much sense, but the revelations and the splatter come so thick and fast in the final act that you hardly have time to worry about it." **HELEN O'HARA**

DANGEROUS ANIMALS

★★★ FILM

"This is Jai Courtney's show. His commitment to the bit sells the film's two-genres-in-one premise — a rare shark film that doesn't try to outdo *Jaws*, instead using the ocean's razor-toothed predators to a different end." **BEN TRAVIS**

HOLLOWAY

★★★★ FILM

"This is a harrowing and unsettling watch, with the trauma of imprisonment unravelling in front of your eyes — but like all the best documentaries, it compels important, urgent questions." **JOHN NUGENT**

FEAR STREET: PROM QUEEN

★ FILM

"This deeply disappointing new instalment in the horror franchise leans too hard into worn-out tropes and excessive gore, at the expense of fun, engaging characters or any genuine scares." **BECKY DARKE**

THE GRID

IN TRON: ARES, THE PROGRAMS BREAK OUT OF THE COMPUTER AND ONTO THE STREETS. WE GO ON SET TO SEE HOW THE PIONEERING SCI-FI FRANCHISE IS GETTING REAL

WORDS
ALEX GODFREY

THE FUTURE IS NOW.

Main: Grid locked. **Right:** Computer programmer Eve Kim (Greta Lee) can't believe her eyes.

Forget Light Cycles, Jeff Bridges wants to talk about driverless cars.

"Have you ridden in a Waymo yet?" A what now? "Driverless car!" he exclaims, with Bridgian exuberance, eyes lit up. "They have those in the States now. I just drove in one a little while ago. It's the wildest thing. It made me think about my great grandchildren, if I live that long, saying to me, 'Wait a minute, you mean you could actually drive your own little missile, you could control it?!' Because I'm thinking, 20 years from now, everybody may be moving around via Waymo."

We're 15 minutes into our conversation about *Tron: Ares*, the third film in a sporadic franchise that, because of the generational divide between each one, speaks to different times, and different tech. And it's got Bridges marvelling at where we are right now, let alone in two decades. Cars without drivers are, he reasons, safer. Aren't the *Tron* films cautionary tales, though? Are driverless cars not scary? We're putting our lives in the hands — as it were — of computers.

"And that's kind of *frightening*, man!" he agrees, synapses tingling. "Or are we, in fact, the computer? Is the computer, you know, an extension of us? Have you heard of 'emergent behaviour'?"

What follows is a lengthy monologue — far too lengthy to print here but, rest assured, it is glorious — about super-organisms, bird murmurations, "the very seed of humanity", presidents, kings, willpower, DNA and, finally circling back to our question, fear. "You can be *not* afraid, and be hit by a drunk driver. We're all *afraid*, man, aren't you afraid? I'm filled with fear these days, you know, making the right choice. You know, what are we going to *do*?"

There's always been a lot of Kevin Flynn in Jeff Bridges. Or vice versa. And *Tron*, kicking off with Steven Lisberger's 1982 film, has always been about boundaries blurring. Worlds colliding. Nobody had ever seen anything like it. There, Flynn was an idealistic young computer programmer who, having been literally sucked into a computer, took digitisation in his stride, battling his way through the Grid with wide-eyed, anti-authoritarian glee while thwarting real-life corporate thieves. In 2010's *Tron: Legacy*, the character leaned into the more mature, zen-like philosopher-dude that the older Bridges had become. ("We were jamming, man," a nostalgic Flynn tells his son Sam (Garrett Hedlund) of years he spent on the Grid. "Building utopia.")

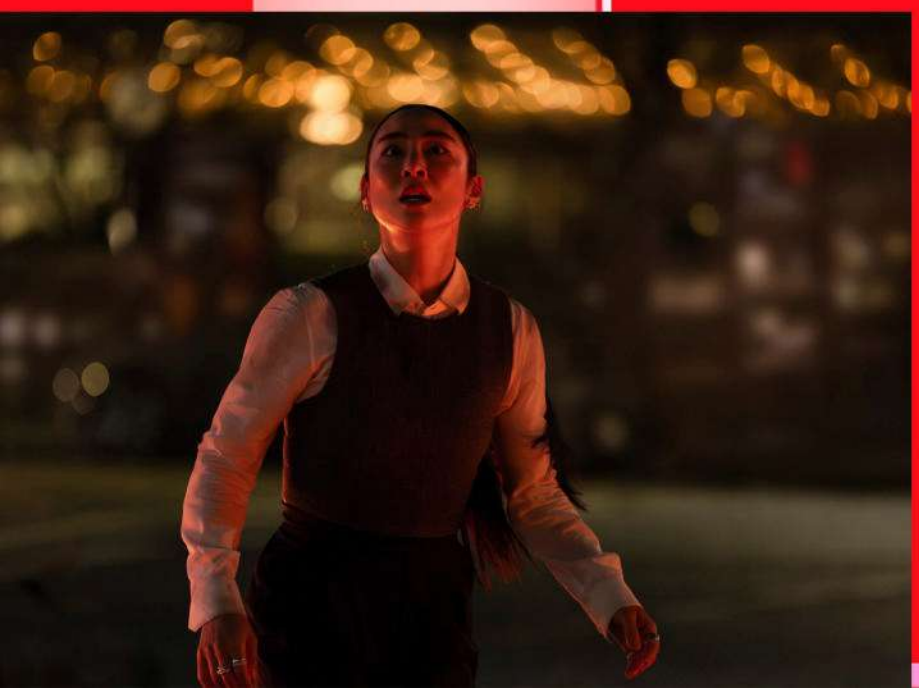
Now, 43 years after Flynn's first appearance, he's back, ready to blow a new generation's minds all over. And this time, *Tron* is taking to the streets.

When people talk about the first film being ahead of its time, I say, 'Actually, it's as if we were *on* time and the rest of the world was late," says Lisberger, who dreamt up this whole universe. His light-bulb moment arrived in the late 1970s while his company, Lisberger Studios, was producing animated shorts and commercials: playing early video-game *Pong*, he started thinking about neon warriors in gladiatorial arenas. He shopped his film idea and test-reels, which mixed live-action drama with computer graphics and back-lit animation, around an uninterested Hollywood until Disney bit, making his dreams a reality, Light Cycles, pixellated psychedelics and all. *Tron* didn't overwhelm the box office, eventually bringing home $50 million, and the Academy didn't get it: the film wasn't deemed worthy of a Best Visual Effects nomination, as its newfangled computer animation was frowned upon. But *Tron* changed the world, immeasurably inspiring its acolytes and blowing open the doors for the future of CGI.

Tron: Legacy, directed by Joseph Kosinski and scored by Daft Punk, brought more sophisticated visuals (albeit alongside some upsettingly primitive de-ageing) while beefing up the mythology. It climaxed operatically, with Kevin Flynn sacrificing himself for his son by absorbing his nefarious alter-ego Clu and thus disintegrating himself (more on that later). That one pulled in $400 million, and a third film was fast-tracked. And now here we are, a rather slow 15 years later.

As *Legacy* was wrapping up production, producer Justin Springer asked Lisberger — also a producer, in his capacity as a creative consultant — about what was going through his head back in the late '70s when he came up with this whole shebang. Lisberger recalls musing on the idea that intelligent life could be created via a machine — by us. An image flickered into being in Springer's mind: a Light Cycle, in the real world, on the road. At the end of *Legacy*, Olivia Wilde's program Quorra escaped the Grid with Sam Flynn to take in some sunrises, but Springer and his team began thinking of a new character created in the virtual world "who then comes out into our world, and wants more".

At first, Ares was to be a supporting character in the film, which languished in development until around 2015, when the ›



Top to bottom: Comfortably smug: Julian Dillinger (Evan Peters); Director Joachim Rønning on set with Lee.

project hit a virtual wall, and stalled. When the team picked it up again a couple of years later, they decided to more or less put the events — and characters — of *Legacy* behind them and create, says Springer, "a new story in the *Tron* world". And with it, a new actor entered the Grid.

Years earlier, Jared Leto had talked to Joseph Kosinski about starring in *Legacy*. Not to play the lead, Sam Flynn, he says when we ask, but "for another character, and the actor was so good in that role that I would have *never* been able to do what he did. He absolutely destroyed it". A one-second process of elimination suggests that this was, more than likely, the preening program Castor, played with flamboyant, Bowie-inflected gusto by Michael Sheen. In any case, the timing wasn't right, says Leto. But when plans were made to move away from *Legacy*'s events, he was once again approached: to play Ares. He was interested, but not in playing a straight-up bad guy. So the character expanded and evolved, and Leto, a "bona fide superfan" of the franchise since he saw Lisberger's film in 1982, got himself a light suit.

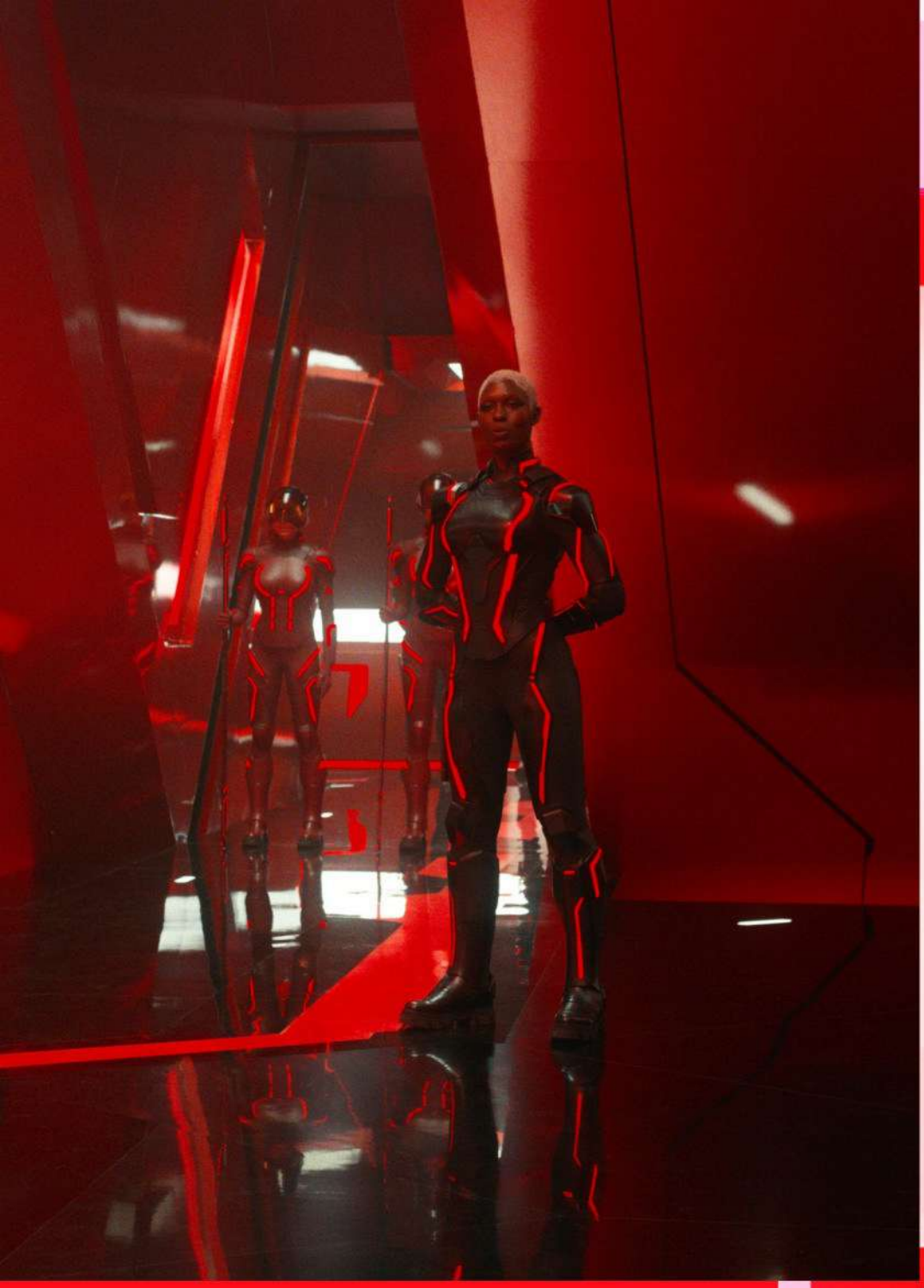
Director Joachim Rønning loved *Tron* too, having worn out the Light Cycle section of the VHS when he was growing up in Norway. Initially in talks to take on *Ares* around 2018, when he was making *Maleficent: Mistress Of Evil*, he signed up at the beginning of 2023, when he was done with *Young Woman And The Sea*. By then, the *Ares* script was in good shape, written by Jesse Wigutow (although, says Rønning, maybe a dozen writers had been developing it over the years before that, including Jez Butterworth, Jack Thorne and Billy Ray).

Ares pits two tech companies against each other. In the bad-guy corner, Ares' creators, the Dillinger corporation, which continues a storied lineage — David Warner played Ed Dillinger in *Tron*; Cillian Murphy popped up as his son in *Legacy*; here, Gillian Anderson, playing Elisabeth Dillinger, and Evan Peters, as her son Julian, run the show. The maternal bond complicates things. "Having a son that behaves in the way that Julian does," says Anderson, suggesting something about his particularly skewed moral compass, "and trying to deal with his actions, both emotionally and logistically — it adds a level of stress and strain to their relationship."

The yin to the Dillingers' yang is Kevin Flynn's tech company Encom, now led by Greta Lee's Eve Kim. The Dillingers and Eve are both searching for Flynn's 'permanence code', which would enable the existence of digital assets in the real world. Eve, rifling through Flynn's early-1980s floppy disks in her Quonset-hut mountain hideaway, hopes it could solve healthcare crises and grow orange groves. "She's asking the same sort of questions that a lot of us are in terms of our relationship with tech and AI," says Lee. "And she's trying to reconcile her own personal success, and capitalism and business and growth, with what it means to be a human."

The Dillingers do not share such altruistic concerns. Militarism is on their minds.

Clockwise from main: Athena (Jodie Turner-Smith); Elisabeth Dillinger (Gillian Anderson) with son Julian; Computer program Ares (Jared Leto); Run, Eve, run; Eve and Ares face off; Cold comfort for Eve and Seth (Arturo Castro); Rønning directs Leto.



It's 14 February 2024, the 23rd of 76 shooting days, when *Empire* visits the set of *Tron: Ares*, and on a Vancouver soundstage, the light suits light up. A lot has changed since 1982. Ares, his second-in-command, Athena (Jodie Turner-Smith), and their team rock aggressive armour, worlds away from Lisberger's spandex warriors. With lights built into the suits, the effect on set is magical, and a little intimidating: it's *Tron*, in the flesh.

Empire sits next to Rønning by the monitors as this morning's sequence kicks off: Dillinger's platoon of programs embarking on a digital heist, stealthily approaching a server core via some stairs. These hackers will be crawling through a firewall — here, a physical tube (CGI will bring it to fiery life).

While the crew prep, actors mill about. Cameron Monaghan, playing Caius, one of Ares' team, practises some fight moves. As it's Valentine's Day, Jodie Turner-Smith is handing out red roses, including to a blushing *Empire*. It's a sweet gesture, only slightly off-set by the fact that she looks so formidable, armoured up, with a bleached-blonde close crop, and no eyebrows. "She is hardcore and fierce and strong and loyal," says Turner-Smith of Athena. "It's really fun to play somebody who's just totally uncompromising and brazenly going about accomplishing their objectives. And I was really willing to take that on right now. I was like, 'Ooh, villain era, let's go.'" As such, she wanted to look the part — it was her decision to remove her eyebrows. She went rogue.

"Joachim actually was not down for that idea," she laughs. "They wanted me to go blonde, so I did, and I also bleached my eyebrows. And then I thought, 'You know what? It's gonna look better if the eyebrows are gone. If anyone's upset, I'll just tell them the bleach made them fall out.' It was one of those times of asking for forgiveness rather than permission." Her thinking was that the look would add an "ambiguity in emotion. So you wouldn't have any clues about what I might be thinking or feeling or planning to do".

Leto is not handing out flowers. As he arrives, also armoured up, he salutes Rønning, who salutes him back. Producer Emma Ludbrook approaches us and tells Rønning, "Just so you know, Ares has gathered his soldiers together for a pep talk." A crew member explains to *Empire* that Leto goes only by 'Ares' on set. There is no Jared here.

"He would come on set and not talk to anyone, which to some cast members could be intimidating, but that's what he wanted," explains Rønning of Leto a few months later. "That's what he used, to play the character." He was in character on and off set, for the entirety of the shoot. "And when I spoke to him, I'd need to go into a role of some sort too. Ares, as Master Control, is like the general of the Grid, so I would treat him like that. When he'd come on to set we'd all straighten up a bit."

Well, not quite all. "Since I'm Flynn, who ›

created that whole world, I figured that I could call him whatever I wanted to," says Jeff Bridges. "I respected his desire to be called Ares, and not have to switch back and forth, but as Flynn I felt sort of special, so on set I called him 'Air'. Flynn's above the whole thing."

Empire speaks to Leto on Zoom this May (a few weeks before reports of sexual misconduct allegations against him, all of which he denies). Talking to us, he somewhat downplays his immersion as Ares. "I mean... it's hard *not* to be immersed when your suit weights 40 lb. That'll put you right in the sweet spot," he says. "It was *painful*. But I *loved* it. I was always happy to be in that suit. And that dictates the way you move, the way you hold your body, the way you walk. So a lot of the character was in the suit. You can't put that suit on and not feel like a warrior from the future."

Back on set in 2024, Leto crouches in position by the firewall, his platoon lined up behind. As the first take begins, so does Ares, softly spoken but purposeful: "Programs, our directive is clear. Cross the plaza, evade security, penetrate the server core and take what we came for." Cameron Monaghan's Caius flags that the odds of evading detection are against them. Ares reassures him, and asks him, and all of them: "Will you fight with me?" "Yes, sir," they respond. "Let's make it ours," says Athena.

This surely can come to no good. If only Kevin Flynn were here to set things right. If only he hadn't died at the end of *Tron: Legacy*. Right?

[redacted]t was supposed to be a secret. "And then suddenly Bridges just goes in the newspaper and says, 'Oh, I'm in *Tron*!'" laughs Rønning. But Kevin Flynn never did follow orders.

"Yeah, I was a bit surprised," says Bridges on his return. "But, you know, this is the Grid. The whole digital universe is all up for grabs. It's all possible in *that* place. It worked out that I still have some sort of consciousness."

Bridges has always felt a deep attachment to Flynn. He played him at 32, 59 and, in *Ares*, at 74, and knows him deeply. "As human beings, we seek perfection," he muses. "And sometimes we miss the whole point of the thing — the idea of the journey being the destination. Flynn originally explored the digital world in the hopes of achieving some sort of perfection for humanity, but now... the plot thickens, you know? As The Dude might say, new shit has come to light."

Speaking to Jeff Bridges is a gas. And by all accounts, so is acting with him. "When Jeff walks on set, it's like Elvis is in the building," says Leto. "It's like Moses is parting the fucking sea. He walks on set, *everything* changes. Everyone's smiling. He's a god among men."

But just as Flynn overlaps with Bridges, so too does he with Lisberger, in many ways the franchise's real, *real* Kevin Flynn — the creator, the gamechanger, the idealist. Certainly, there's a lot of affection between Lisberger and Bridges, four decades' strong. "I feel really lucky that we got Jeff. He has just been a really imaginative, courageous and far-out dude," says Lisberger. "We've touched base over the years," says Bridges. "We really love each other. And it's important for me that Lisberger has given a stamp to it all."

Clockwise from top left: Ready to rumble; The formidable Athena; A fraught Seth and Eve; Welcome to my Tron talk: Ajay Singh (Hasan Minhaj); Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) in 2010's *Tron: Legacy*; Ares is on the warpath; A Light Cycle in action.

Every passing year confirms that Lisberger was ahead of his time with 1982's *Tron*. It's the way of things, he reasons of the original's slow burn: "Something comes out, and it's too avant-garde at the time. And then the real world catches up with it." That first film portrayed a fantastical world in which people were suddenly flung into digital environments. On set of *Ares*, we visit the Volume, where, at the touch of a button, we're now surrounded — engulfed — by a photo-realistic mountain landscape, the effect disorientating and dazzling. "The ironies of this whole process are just amazing," says Lisberger.

There is, with *Tron* more than most sci-fi franchises, the pressure to pioneer, to present the shock of the new, as Lisberger did 43 years ago. Everyone who's been beavering away at Industrial Light & Magic, says Rønning, is treating it all like it's "the Holy Grail of computer graphics". There will be things in this film, he promises, that we've never seen before. Also, he mentions that there was some mechanically precise camerawork on the Grid via motion control: "The concept was that a program is filming a program. So it's shot by a robot."

Thirty of *Ares*' shooting days took place on location in Vancouver: as opposed to the previous two films, this one zips in and out of the digital and real world throughout. *Empire* is shown footage of Ares and Athena bombing it down the

street on Light Cycles, light trails illuminating the Tarmac, splitting cop-cars in half. On set, we are introduced to a pair of custom Harley-Davidsons, built for speed and designed for digital replacement, although we also find ourselves up-close and personal with an *actual* Light Cycle, as iconic in reality as it is on screen.

"It has become a symbol of our riding this technology that is going faster than we ever imagined," says Lisberger. "We've integrated into it, and the speed of it is mind-boggling. And in *Ares*, it's a metaphor for the fact that this technology is moving through every part of our reality."

And yes: his 1982 film feels more terrifyingly prescient by the day. "Yeah, it is," he nods. "And no-one's more surprised than me."

With tech developing so fast in the real world, the team were at pains to keep *Ares* as current as possible, the screenplay constantly in flux. "Everything was shifting on a day-to-day basis," says Greta Lee. "This movie was going to be coming out a year from when we were in the heat of the AI conversation around the writers' strike. So we got to incorporate a ton of that into the movie."

In April last year, during filming in Vancouver, there happened to be a five-day TED conference in the city. "It was primarily about AI, and how to make it human-centric," continues Lee, who soaked it up, speaking to various AI scientists, notably, Fei-Fei Li, known as 'the Godmother of AI'; she cameos in the film, as herself, interviewing Lee as Eve Kim. "The movie touches all of these things," says Lee. And it all comes back to Lisberger. "So many days on set, we would get the chills," says Lee, "because the ideas that he put in place years ago are not just still relevant, but in our faces. Inescapable."

Yet, looking back, The Tronfather is more sombre than nostalgic. When we mention how heartening it was to see original designs from 1982's concept-art wizards Moebius and Syd Mead up on *Ares*' production walls, he hangs down his head somewhat. "I could start crying right now," he says. "Because Syd has passed on, and Moebius has passed on, and [*Tron* designer] Peter Lloyd has passed on... Just a few days ago, Bruce Logan, our cinematographer [on *Tron*], passed on." He goes on, listing more of his fallen comrades. "That becomes difficult to deal with. They're not going to see this film. I'm really happy that all of this is happening, happening to me, and I'm glad to still be alive. But at the same time, there's a melancholy note to it."

Just like Kevin Flynn himself, though, these trailblazers' legacies live on. And Rønning, who spent his youth endlessly rewatching the original Light Cycle sequence, carries the torch with pride. "What's so cool about *Tron* is it's a bit of an acquired taste. It's grittier, it's darker," he says, pointing to the fact that Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross are scoring the film, under the guise of their industrial-rock band Nine Inch Nails. With our interview done, he's off to work with them. "It's insane music," he grins. "They were on board before we started shooting, so I had their music in my head when I shot scenes, thinking about how I could live up to it."

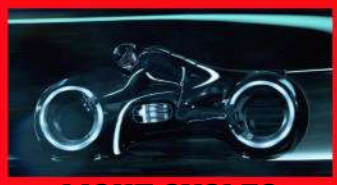
This sonic cake-icing has fired up Jodie Turner-Smith, too. "It's fucking cool," she says. "When I watched [David Fincher's] *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, I thought, 'I would love if, in my life, I was in a movie with them doing the score.' And here we are: *Tron 3*, Nine Inch Nails — let's fucking go."

Here we are. The future is now.

***TRON: ARES* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 10 OCTOBER**

TRONOPEDIA

GET TO KNOW YOUR PIXELS



LIGHT CYCLES

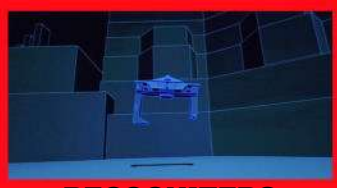
Basically a big, fat, space-age motorbike, the Light Cycle is *Tron*'s most indelible bit of iconography. Conceived by Steven Lisberger and designed by Syd Mead, these chunky digital hot-rods are geometric beauties, taking those right-angle turns like no-one's business. But don't drive into any light ribbons — you'll die in a hail of neon (pretty, though).

THE GRID

"A digital frontier," explained Jeff Bridges' Kevin Flynn in *Tron: Legacy*, featuring "clusters of information as they moved through the computer. What did they look like?... Freeways?" In short: yes. The Grid is where the magic happens. As terrifying as it is beautiful, once you're in, it's hard to get out. But it's worth the trip, man.

IDENTITY DISCS

These glowing circular appendages, affixed to the back of your light suit, record everything about you on the Grid, everything you experience — as well as being used as fatal Frisbees. Up until now, they have very much been discs — in *Tron: Ares*, though, Ares, the Master Control, rocks a more angular design. You don't want one of those in your neck.



RECOGNIZERS

At first sight, these hovering, flying, arch-like vehicles look, well, like hovering, flying arches. But don't be fooled: originally the product of Kevin Flynn's Space Paranoids game, they were quickly co-opted on the Grid as fascist weaponry, and these giant bastards will flock towards you with extreme prejudice. And they sound like petulant helicopters. Avoid.

BREAKING THE

THEY REVOLUTIONISED THE FILM-SCORE LANDSCAPE. NOW, AS NINE INCH NAILS TAKE ON

SOUND BARRIER

WORDS
ALEX GODFREY

TRON: ARES, TRENT REZNOR AND ATTICUS ROSS TELL US HOW THEY'RE SHAPING THE FUTURE

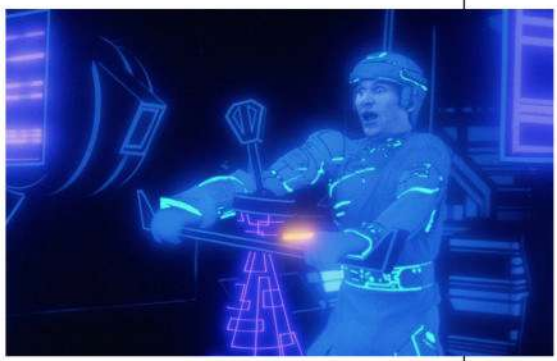
"IT'S COMING IN HOT," SAYS TRENT REZNOR.

"It's going," says Atticus Ross. "It's definitely going. Where, not sure."

This is how Nine Inch Nails respond to us asking how it's going. Maybe they're being enigmatic. Maybe their small-talk is a cut above the average. Maybe they're just a little frazzled, working on the score for *Tron: Ares*, while also prepping for a world tour, while also prepping their own music festival, while also talking to *Empire*. Zooming in from a nondescript white room in a Burbank rehearsal hall, all of the above scenarios may be true. "We like to multitask and do many things at once," deadpans Reznor. Ross laughs, perhaps morbidly.

Nine Inch Nails *are* coming in hot, though, with *Ares* being the first score Reznor and Ross have produced under their band moniker. It is a happening. An event. An earth-shaking one, figuratively and quite possibly literally.

Blindsiding the alternative-rock scene with debut album *Pretty Hate Machine* in 1989, Nine Inch Nails, practically a one-man band back then, at least on record, was a synth-driven explosion of Reznor's angst. 1994's dirtier, grittier, angrier opus *The Downward Spiral*, chronicling his addiction, depression and self-destruction, was huge, and since then, the band has been ever-experimental, the music as comforting as it is discomforting, depending on your mental state.



Clockwise from here: Atticus Ross and Trent Reznor at work on *Tron: Ares*; *Lost Highway*; *The Social Network*; *Natural Born Killers*; 1982's Reznor-inspiring *Tron*.

Having Reznor and Ross score a film as NIN is a swerve. "Nine Inch Nails, for Christ's sake," *Ares* director Joachim Rønning squeals to *Empire*. He can barely believe it himself. "How often do you go and watch a movie with Nine Inch Nails scoring it? Never."

Reznor's first soundtrack work was in 1994. Oliver Stone invited him to see a cut of *Natural Born Killers*, to approve the use of a couple of Nine Inch Nails songs; Reznor loved the film and said he fancied producing the album version of the soundtrack, transforming it, as he suggested to Stone, "into a collage of sound". He edited the songs, splicing audio from the film in and out of them, resulting in a cinematic listening experience in its own right, frightening and sublime. Doing the work gave him a taste for it all. "I'd like to do a real soundtrack," he told *Vox* magazine at the time. "I'm interested in composing."

In 1997, he created a couple of instrumental pieces for David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (not that he was shown any footage; for one piece, Lynch asked for the sound of snakes coming out of a box, "whizzing past your face"). Around the same time, finally getting sober after years of nihilistic self-harm, Reznor signed Atticus Ross' band 12 Rounds to his record label, Nothing, Reznor finding in Ross a new friend and collaborator: they worked on a couple of side-projects together, and Ross became a programmer for Nine Inch Nails. And in 2010, they scored *The Social Network* for David Fincher, winning an Oscar for it. They've gone on to foster ongoing relationships with Fincher (*The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, *Gone Girl*, *Mank*, *The Killer*) and Luca Guadagnino (*Bones And All*, *Challengers*, *Queer* and the upcoming *After The Hunt*), amassing an increasingly eclectic body of work that counts, among others, Damon Lindelof's *Watchmen*, Pixar's *Soul* and Jeff Rowe's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.

This time, though, it's different. This time, they're going hard. As Nails.

"I spent a lot of time recently thinking about how *Tron*'s imprinted into my consciousness," says Reznor, recalling the impact the first film had on him in 1982. "Largely from being excited about how strange it looked and felt. And the *Tron* video game, particularly Wendy Carlos' music from the film, which was *in* the game, was a big thing for me. I grew up in a little town in Pennsylvania, and the explosion of video games had a big impact on my life."

He was 17 in 1982, and his tastes were forming as the world changed. "Things were lining up: keyboard-based instruments, technology, science-fiction, electronics... and the advent of using computers in music-production and writing. And that was when I was coming to life and realising that some form of this was my calling. I worked in a keyboard shop, selling high-end synthesisers to people, stuff I couldn't afford, but I had access to mess around and experiment and be enamoured with them."

In the middle of all this was Wendy Carlos. The synth-pioneer had worked with Stanley Kubrick on *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Shining*, but *Tron* was her first full score. Her influence on Reznor, back then as a teen and beyond, was huge. "Wendy Carlos was inescapable," he says. "She was the Jimi Hendrix of synthesisers, in terms of elevating the instrument into being considered a serious instrument, as opposed to a fraud or a replacement or a toy. I think her work expanded what the concept of an instrument could be. That something didn't have to be made hundreds of years ago to be legit."

For 2010's *Tron: Legacy*, Daft Punk took Carlos' gauntlet and sped off with it. Bucking expectations, the electronica icons went orchestral. "As a big fan of Daft Punk, I thought it was interesting, how they chose to approach that score," says Reznor. "It defined the movie, in a way." For years, the *Tron: Ares* team stewed over who could take the gauntlet from *them*. It was producer Sean Bailey's idea, remembers Rønning, to call on NIN; Tom MacDougall, President of Walt Disney Music, who they knew from working on *Soul*, popped the question.

"A couple of years ago," says Reznor, "he came by the studio and said, 'Do you think you guys would be interested in scoring *Tron*?' He didn't even finish the sentence, I was like, 'Fuck *yes*, we'd want to do that.' And he said, 'How would you feel about if it was credited as Nine Inch Nails, versus Trent and Atticus?' We weren't expecting to hear that question."

The next question, then, is how that has changed things. "How it's manifested itself," says Reznor, "is it set up a different set of rules." He talks for a good few minutes about what it all means, but what it comes down to is this: with their NIN hats on, they imposed some boundaries, to give it focus. Psychological trickery, he calls it. "When we started working on it, occasionally we'd say, 'Well, this is a Nine Inch Nails score.' It added a different kind of feel to the way we approached it."

As such, this score brought added pressure: not just of stepping into Wendy Carlos and Daft Punk's shoes, but also of doing it as NIN. A bigger weight of expectation all round. They give each score their best, says Ross, but "when you apply Nine Inch Nails on the top of that, there's a little bit more... well, I wake up at four in the morning slightly more often than I used to, sometimes, getting this film done," he laughs. "We welcome the challenge in the high bar," says Reznor.

Whereas Daft Punk went orchestral, Nine Inch Nails have... not. "I'll give a few spoilers: there's not one second of orchestra in our score," says Reznor. "It sounds precise and unpleasant at times. It's not an atonal, punishing score, but we spent a lot of time thinking about the undertones of what's happening in the story. The concept of artificial life infused with feelings and emotions and a sense of questioning their purpose and their replaceability, their lack of soul, in some ways. We kind of riffed on that." ›

And there will be songs. "You'll be able to put on the record and listen to it thinking it's a Nine Inch Nails album," says Reznor. "It feels like a Nine Inch Nails album that is [also] *Tron*. It's in the lineage of what came before, in terms of Wendy Carlos and Daft Punk, [but] it's its own thing." To steal a track title from Daft Punk's *Tron: Legacy* score: The game has changed.

Reznor and Ross have been changing the game from the start. Back in 2010, when David Fincher hired them for *The Social Network*, it was something of a rogue move. Some 'alternative' musicians had broken through as film scorers — Danny Elfman, Nick Cave, Clint Mansell — but NIN seemed like a wildcard.

Fincher was full-in. He had used a remix of Nine Inch Nails' 'Closer' for *Seven*'s title sequence, had asked Reznor to write a *Fight Club* musical (it never happened) and, working on *The Social Network*, used the band's instrumental album *Ghosts* as temp music. Reznor initially turned him down, exhausted from finishing a tour, and concerned about jumping in without having scored a film before. But Fincher eventually persuaded him, and Reznor asked Ross, who had just scored the Hughes brothers' *The Book Of Eli*, to join him. Still: their trepidation was huge.

"We were very honest to David about, 'We don't know how to do this,'" says Reznor. "We have a great amount of respect for him, and we didn't want to screw his movie up." Fincher, though, encouraged and nurtured them, telling them to just get started. For the first few weeks, they had to figure out how to even do it. "I didn't know the process, or even how you go about trying to, you know, score walking up some steps, shit like that," says Reznor.

But then came an epiphany. Nine Inch Nails had always been about emotion, and the same could be applied here. "*The Social Network*, to me," says Reznor, "was about someone [Mark Zuckerberg] believing in a vision so much that they would do anything to execute it, but fuck their friends over in the process, and then feel like, 'Man, was that worth it?' I know versions of *that*. So once I could emotionally extract what the story was, it felt like, 'I know how *that* music sounds.'" From there, they were off to the races — specifically so when they scored the film's Henley Royal Regatta scene, which brought Reznor full-circle: Fincher wanted them to create a version of Grieg's 'In The Hall Of The Mountain King'... but sounding like Wendy Carlos.

The breakthrough about finding the emotional core, says Ross, "informed every film since, including *Tron*. We were faced with a choice: 'Do we try and make this like what we *think* a film score is, or do we just go with our instinct?' We could have easily just taken a step a little bit further to the right or the left and not made that decision — it's not like we're the most confident people in the world, anything but. So that was a monumental step, in a psychological sense." The result was an electronic score humming with as much foreboding as it did warmth, wrapping the film in an unsettling blanket. "It felt like you had a superpower, like the Force," says Reznor of its effect. "To make people feel a certain thing. Having not ever done it before, it was really exciting."

Then came the awards campaign, and with it returned the insecurity. These weren't their people. "You have to go eat 200 dinners at every guild, all of this shit," says Reznor. "And we felt like imposters. Then, impossibly, we started winning everything." Including the Golden Globe ("Holy shit!" tweeted Reznor shortly afterwards), and then the Oscar. That night, Hans Zimmer — who was nominated for his *Inception* score and had got to know them at all of those dinners — came up to them. As Reznor remembers: "He said, 'I'm really happy that you won. Because it broadens the parameters of what a film score can be.'"

Here: For *Tron: Ares*, the pair have riffed on the concept of artificial life. **Below, clockwise from top left:** Reznor lays down the guitar track; *Twin Peaks: The Return*; *Challengers*; Nailed it.

Criterion Collection, Getty Images, Imago, John Crawford

In 2016, David Lynch came calling.

The sound of *Eraserhead* had influenced what a young Reznor wanted Nine Inch Nails to be. On tour in the early '90s, Reznor delayed some Nine Inch Nails gigs so they could watch *Twin Peaks* on TV. So when Lynch asked if the band would perform in Episode 8 of *The Return*, it was a no-brainer. Says Reznor: "That was another one of, when the call came in, 'Would you like to be in *Twin*...', you don't even have to finish the sentence. 'When do you need me?' I loved David... I *love* David Lynch. I wished I had worked with him more. He was the guy you wished he would be. He was that guy."

For their performance in the Roadhouse bar (2016 also saw Ross become the only other permanent member of NIN), Lynch asked them to submit a song, and they gave him something they though would fit — it was floaty, ethereal, spooky. "It was me trying to sound like *Twin Peaks* music," says Reznor. "It was stupid. And [Lynch] politely implied the same thing. I said, 'You're right, what do you want it to be?' And he goes, 'I want something mean and ugly.'"

"'Something that makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck,'" remembers Ross. They obliged, with the very mean and very ugly 'She's Gone Away', which Lynch liked. They performed it with no knowledge of the rest of the episode, which turned out to be a genuinely seminal piece of television, all atom bombs, murderous woodsmen, other-worldly insects crawling into throats, and the birth of BOB. "When it came on TV that night, I remember almost passing out," says Reznor, overcome by how great it was.

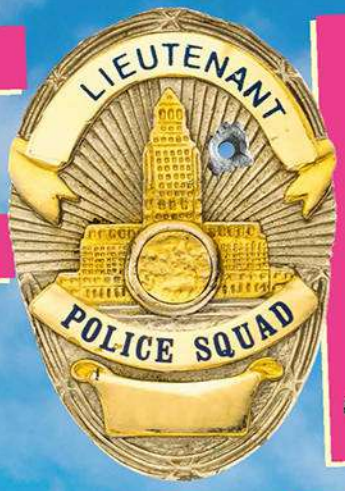
Reznor and Ross' most prolific collaboration right now is with Luca Guadagnino. For his hyper-sexual tennis drama *Challengers*, the director told them he wanted the music to be aggressive and overwhelming techno. They delivered a score that reeks of hormones and adrenaline, some pieces lasting mere seconds, violently dropping in and out. All, says Ross, precision-engineered: "Every frame of that was scored to picture. We mixed the film as well. I mean, we're control freaks."

They've been scoring films for 15 years now. That's 15 years of exquisite control-freakery. And serving other masters — or at least, serving cinema — has informed what they do as Nine Inch Nails, too. "100 per cent," says Reznor. "It has broadened my appreciation of the power and possibilities of music considerably. It's taught me a lot about collaboration, which I don't think I would do, left to my own devices, sitting in a room, scowling at the world. You get sent on insane missions." One of which, he says, was Fincher's directive for the *Mank* score. "He said, 'I want it to feel like someone found the canister of film lost in a vault in 1936 and no-one's seen it since.' You come out the other end with your field of vision greater than it was going into it. So the net result of all that, for me personally, is one where I feel appreciative that Nine Inch Nails exists, and I have an opportunity to work in that container, more than I do when I'm in it all the time and I start to bitch about, you know, whatever."

Having, as Hans Zimmer said, broadened the parameters, Reznor and Ross are now curating their own film-score festival, in LA this November: Future Ruins, celebrating some of the scene's most notable pioneers, newer heroes such as Cristobal Tapia de Veer and Hildur Guðnadóttir playing alongside legends like John Carpenter and Goblin. And, of course, themselves. "It seemed like a good idea, and two years into thinking about it, it still seems like a good idea," says Reznor.

But first: *Ares*. A score that might just change the game once more. "It's different [from the previous *Tron* scores]", says Ross, "and in places, perhaps takes a bigger swing for what music can do in cinema. Without sounding fucking pompous. I mean, that was a goal. You know, if you're going to do it, then you may as well take a big swing."

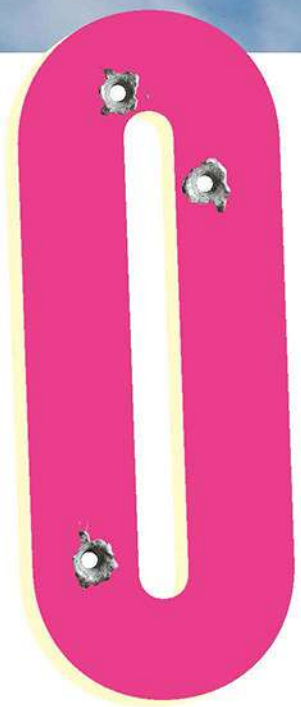
THE FORCE AWAKENS



IT'S BEEN THREE DECADES SINCE A BUMBLING DREBIN ATTEMPTED TO CRACK A CASE. BUT NOW **THE NAKED GUN** IS BACK, SWAPPING LESLIE NIELSEN FOR LIAM NEESON.

WILL IT BE ANY COP?

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**



ONE OBJECT STRUCK fear into the hearts of interviewers around the world throughout the 1980s and '90s. It was a contraption built by a golf pro in Oklahoma City for one purpose, and one purpose only. And whether you were David Letterman or Lorraine Kelly, it could be unleashed at any moment, derailing your careful line of questioning with a single well-timed parp. Yes, Leslie Nielsen's Pooter Tooter, a handheld fart machine made of plastic and rubber, was a powerful force of chaos. And the late star played the wind instrument like a maestro, maintaining a poker face as he reduced audiences to roars of laughter and left talk-show hosts speechless.

"I do not travel anywhere alone," he told Conan O'Brien on live TV one night, after revealing the offending item. "That goes with me all over... It always comes in handy."

Nielsen's relentless dedication to the bit — below his name on his gravestone in Florida are the words, "Let 'er rip" — boosted his transformation into a gigantic comedy star in the '80s. *Airplane!* used him as an ace card; nobody expected the dignified captain from *The Poseidon Adventure* to be so damn silly. And although the great TV cop-show spoof, *Police Squad!*, was swiftly cancelled, its follow-up movie, 1988's *The Naked Gun*, sealed the deal, Nielsen's hapless but ever-self-assured LAPD officer Frank Drebin becoming a big-screen phenomenon. Two sequels followed, with Nielsen claiming at one point that he was signing over a thousand autographs a day (as with everything he said, there's a high probability this is nonsense). When the series wound down in the mid-'90s, no serious attempt was made to replace him.

Yet three decades on, a fresh Drebin is picking up the badge, in a new *Naked Gun*. And there was one moment on set that would seem to confirm the correct successor to Nielsen had been found. "He was actually the most game for the most silly stuff," says director Akiva Schaffer of his star. "I was constantly surprised. He would be on set adding fart jokes, and I'd have to be like, 'Remember, three scenes earlier we have that fart joke. So if you do it here, it might be too early.'"

"*One*," corrects Liam Neeson of the quantity of fart jokes he devised. "I can't tell it to you." Then he adds, with absolute gravity, "And I don't think he did put it in. So fuck you!"

IN 1994 TRILOGY-CAPPER *The Naked Gun 33 ⅓: The Final Insult*, Drebin and his wife Jane (Priscilla Presley) are trying for a kid. At one point, Frank daydreams about having a young son, who looks exactly like him, down to the white hair, suit and tie. Finally, at the end of the movie, said son, Frank Jr, is actually born. And with him, the seed of an eventual sequel.

But much like Drebin attempting to arrest a suspect, park a car, or, well, do anything, belated attempts to resuscitate *The Naked Gun*

Right: Frank Drebin Jr (Liam Neeson) brings a whole new set of skills. **Below, left to right:** Director Akiva Schaffer on set with Neeson and Paul Walter Hauser, who plays Captain Ed Hocken — son of, yes, Captain Ed Hocken; Car trouble. **Bottom, from top:** There's something about Beth: Pamela Anderson as the series' new "femme fatale"; The squad of sons pay homage to their forebears.

went awry. A mooted 2009 sequel starring Nielsen himself sputtered out. A version that would feature Ed Helms as "Frank Drebin, no relation" and call itself 'Episode IV: A New Hope' went kaboom. Meanwhile, David Zucker — who directed the first two *Naked Gun* films and co-wrote all three — pitched his own fourquel to Paramount; his vision was for Andy Samberg to play Drebin Jr, not a cop but a spy.

The studio nixed that idea too. But oddly enough, the film that *did* get greenlit is being overseen by a comedy compadre of Samberg. Along with Samberg and Jorma Taccone, Akiva Schaffer is a member of Lonely Island, the trio whose often-brilliant 'Digital Shorts' have enlivened countless episodes of *Saturday Night Live*, and whose *Popstar: Never Stop Never Stopping* has a shout at being the funniest film of the past decade.

Despite being the director of a 2022 *Chip 'N Dale: Rescue Rangers* film, Schaffer is deadly serious about comedy; in Neeson's piss-takey words, "He's a bit of a nerd. He analyses it, maybe intellectualises it a bit much." To talk to Schaffer about *The Naked Gun* is to get a masterclass in its origins, influences and internal tensions. "There was a Lee Marvin show, *M Squad*. Watch the opening credits, you're like, 'Oh, it *is Police Squad!*,'" he explains. "There's dialogue in there from *Dirty Harry*. The whole *Manchurian Candidate* thing is actually from a Charles Bronson movie called *Telefon*. I have it on DVD here. It's definitely worth a watch. There are scenes in there that are straight-up *Naked Gun*."

Someone who owns *Telefon* on DVD is probably exactly the right person to take on this gig. Yet Schaffer was daunted by the enormity of the job at hand. The original *Naked Gun* may not be high art (let's not forget it features a scene involving Drebin accidentally brandishing a concrete dildo), but it is a pitch-perfect blend of sight gags, genius wordplay and deadpan drollery. "It was just one of my favourite movies of all time. It's like a magic trick. It's just perfect. Which is of course the reason to *not* take on something like this," Schaffer says. "So when they came to me and said, 'Do you want to look at *Naked Gun*?', my first instinct was, 'Of course not.'"

Producer Seth MacFarlane, though, had an ace up his sleeve. An ace that was 6 feet and 4 inches tall. Because he was bringing to the table, as a prospective Frank Drebin Jr, Liam Neeson. "That changed the entire equation for me," recalls Schaffer. "Not only is Liam one of the last 'gravitas' leading men, he also is one of the only ones that has barely used it for comedy. There's a lot of handsome guys — Jon Hamm, Alec Baldwin types — that if they had never done a comedy they could do it, and you'd be like, 'Whoa, where did this come from?' But they realised very early on that they could use their power for laughs."

Neeson, on the other hand, has rarely flexed that power. As a kid in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, he'd giggle through Laurel & Hardy shorts at his local cinema ("There'd be two of those before the bleak Western, you know?"). He names among his favourite comedies *The Ladykillers*, *Tropic Thunder* and, somewhat surprisingly, *Napoleon Dynamite*. He even hosted *Saturday Night Live* back in 2004, though that was a fraught experience. "You could have heard a pin drop during all my sketches," he remembers morosely of the dress rehearsal that Saturday night. "Literally, a pin drop." ›

So stern has Neeson's demeanour been in so many films, from *Batman Begins* to *Taken*, that Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant made an entire skit out of it. In 2011's *Life's Too Short*, Neeson played himself, menacingly outlining plans to move into comedy. He unveiled a list of things he wanted to do in the comic sphere ("I'm always making lists. In fact, that's probably why Steven Spielberg cast me as Oskar Schindler in *Schindler's List*") before gravely demanding, "Let's do some improvisational comedy. *Now*."

It remains an extremely funny sequence. But despite appearances in MacFarlane's *A Million Ways To Die In The West* (as outlaw villain Clinch Leatherwood) and *Ted 2* (as a man attempting to buy cereal in the most terrifying way possible), Neeson is as yet untested as the lead of a feature-length comedy. "I wouldn't say it was nerve-racking," he says, "but every day I would go up to Akiva after we wrapped and say, 'How was it?' Because I just didn't know. I did not want to emulate the wonderful Leslie Nielsen, but the only thing I grabbed from him was, 'Be serious. Don't try to be funny. Just stick to being a serious cop who is a bit of a doofus.'"

Above: Who says cops and women don't mix? **Above right:** Car park trouble. **Right, top to bottom:** Frank follows in his father's footsteps. Unclear if he ran two over; Kevin Durand as the villainous Gustafson; Frank embracing his inner schoolgirl.

THE CASTING OF Neeson helped set the vibe of the whole film. "Liam's got his own things, but they're not Leslie Nielsen's things," says Schaffer. "It would also be unfair to Liam [to try to mimic Nielsen], because he'd be spending the whole movie trying to match something that is another human being with a whole different — forgive me — set of skills." While Frank Drebin Sr was no slouch when it came to dispatching bad guys (let's not forget he personally killed 1,000 drug dealers, though the last two he just happened to back over with his car), his son has more advanced fighting skills. Schaffer confirms that the *Taken* series is one of the touchpoints.

But that's just one ingredient in this anything-goes gumbo of comedy. "I was like, 'Wow, there are 30 years of *Law & Order*s and *CSI*s and all those procedurals'," says Schaffer. "And the *John Wick*s, and *Mission: Impossible*s, and James Bond movies that have become very different than they were back then." All is ripe for lampoonery, including the original films themselves and their stars — behold the teaser's best joke, in which the son of Nordberg, aka movie-star-turned-murder-suspect-O.J. Simpson, breaks the fourth wall, shaking his head at the expectation that he'll kneel in reverence to his dad.

However daft things get, the actors have to play it straight — or rather, as Schaffer prefers to phrase it, "play it real" — as if they're in fact appearing in something vying for Academy Awards consideration. "The music is the music from that movie, the lighting is the lighting from that movie, the actors are the people they're

supposed to be," he explains. "They're just saying the wrong things and doing the wrong things, but nothing else is wrong."

An essential ingredient in the originals was Priscilla Presley as Nielsen's foil, the beaver-wielding Jane. And in the new *Naked Gun* there is a major female character named Beth, who is equally crucial. Schaffer looked at some big names, before finding the answer in a less predictable place, in the form of someone who had in fact almost appeared in *33 ⅓* back in 1994.

"The part that Anna Nicole [Smith] played, I almost played," reveals Pamela Anderson. "It was just scheduling. I couldn't do it. But it's good: I'd rather play this role." Anderson, who started her career with TV sitcoms and had a happier *SNL* experience than Neeson when she hosted in 1997, loves comedy (her favourite is *The Jerk*). She gunned for the role of Beth, doing multiple Zooms with Schaffer from her Canadian home. Recalls Schaffer: "It was giving me the feeling of the various people they would cast in those movies, where there's a little twinkle in their eye. They're never giving it up at all that it's a gag, but you can tell they're having a little bit of fun somewhere deep, that lets you in to have fun with them."

On her first day, Anderson had major jitters. "It was just a rehearsal — the scene where I come to tell him about my murdered brother, wearing my femme-fatale beret. But still, meeting Liam and everybody for the first time... for me it's always really hard." Even so, she and Neeson hit it off in grand style. "We just had a ball. I was always showering him with loaves of bread and cookies and muffins," she says. "There was a little book-shop on the set, and he found this poetry book by Ibsen, and he was explaining to me a little bit about him. And then for his birthday, I got him a first-edition Hemingway. He's always got a book in hand, and the same with me."

Ibsen and Hemingway, on a *Naked Gun* set? It's not a punchline, honest. "This beautiful actress arrived on set, no airs or graces, no big ego," Neeson rhapsodises. "She's a cook. She's a gardener. She reads a lot of poetry. She's just a great woman, she really is."

Together, the duo faced everything that Schaffer, plus co-writers Dan Gregor and Doug Mand, chucked at them. Which was a lot. Neeson donned a schoolgirl uniform (and knickers) for a bank-robbery sequence, as seen in the teaser trailer — "I just stayed in it and sat in front of the crew between set-ups. I didn't go to a dressing room or cover up. That's just the way it is," he shrugs. And Anderson teases a "musical element that will be very surprising... Some of the things they made us say, I mean, it was just crazy stuff. Akiva would say, 'Oh my God, this is so fun. Look what I can make these people do.'"

"I mean, yeah, that's kind of the joy," admits the director. "A friend of mine, when I was just starting to write, was like, 'Feels to me like your assignment is: what's the funniest thing that you can make Liam Neeson say?' And, well, that is kind of it."

WHEN NEESON SPEAKS to *Empire*, it's the day after he's seen a cut of the film for the first time. "Sitting in a lovely little theatre on 45th Street, with my co-star Pamela, and you're seeing yourself on a big screen for the first time in years," he muses. "There was a lot to assimilate." And how was the experience?

"Shit," Neeson says.

There's a long pause, in which we feel much like Gervais and Merchant in *Life's Too Short*, attempting to parse the mood. Then, finally, the punchline: "I'm joking, of course." The actor's deadpan remains heavyweight class.

His real review is more upbeat, at least by his standards. "Pamela is terrific in it. There's a great cast. And, as Clint Eastwood says, I'm my usual adequate self." As for Anderson, she sees the film as something the world is calling out for. "We need a *Naked Gun* in the climate that we're in right now. You know: slapstick, giggles, silly humour."

David Zucker has been vocal in his criticism of the film's mere existence (though Schaffer says he's friendly with him, having visited his house and been shown the Anal Intruder from *Top Secret!*, a holy relic of movie history that is stashed in Zucker's garage). But for many others, the fact that *The Naked Gun* is en route to cinemas is a hopeful fact — in 2025, it's a rarity for a comedy to get the theatrical treatment. "That was part of the draw," says Schaffer. "And I will say, we went out to Arizona for a preview, and so many of the cards were like, 'It had been so long since I just laughed in a theatre with 300 people.' You're just making something silly. But then some people were like, 'I found it life-affirming, because it reminded me the world could still be like the way it was.'"

Just one question remains. Will Neeson follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, and deploy a fart machine on the press tour? Frankly, we're too afraid to ask him. But Schaffer is happy to reply on his behalf. "Liam's not going to bring any farts," he laughs. "He's going to have one that does barf sounds. It's *completely* different."

***THE NAKED GUN* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 AUGUST**

SPEAKING FRANKLY

WILL FRANK DREBIN JR LIVE UP TO HIS DAD'S BON MOTS?

"Wilma, I promise you: whatever scum did this, not one man on this force will rest for one minute until he's behind bars. Now, let's grab a bite to eat."

"Looks like the cows have come home to roost."

"I'm sure that we can handle this situation maturely, just like the responsible adults that we are. Isn't that right, Mr Poopy Pants?"

"I like my sex the way I play basketball: one on one and with as little dribbling as possible."

(*Being shot at by an assassin*) "I'm sorry, I can't hear you. Don't fire the gun while you're talking."

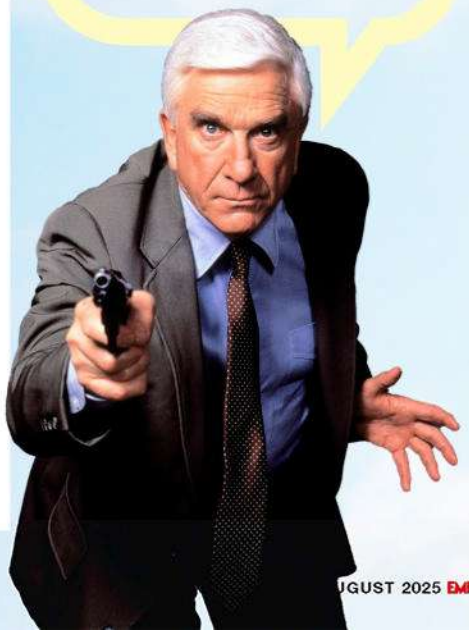
"Jane, since I met you I've noticed things that I never knew were there before... birds singing, dew glistening on a newly formed leaf, stoplights."

"The truth hurts, doesn't it, Hapsburg? Oh sure, maybe not as much as jumping on a bicycle with the seat missing, but it hurts."

"A parachute not opening, that's a way to die. Getting caught in the gears of a combine. Having your nuts bit off by a Laplander, that's the way I want to go."

"We shot a lot of people together. It's been great. But today I retire, so if I do any shooting now, it'll have to be within the confines of my own home. Hopefully it'll be an intruder and not an in-law, like at my bachelor party."

"Take care of yourself, baby. By the way, I faked every orgasm."



MULTIPLE CHOICE

In **Materialists**, Dakota Johnson's matchmaker must choose between Chris Evans and Pedro Pascal. We squeeze onto a sofa with the trio to discuss love and money

Words
Iana Murray

Portraits
Charlie Clift

GIVE ANYONE THE TASK OF NAMING THE most ineffable, charming stars of today, and odds are Dakota Johnson, Chris Evans and Pedro Pascal would make that list. Who better to bring them together in a thorny love triangle, then, than director Celine Song, whose Best Picture-nominated debut, *Past Lives*, saw three people bound together by decades of unfulfilled desires and questions of 'what if'?

Materialists is not quite so tragic, but is tantalising all the same. Johnson plays Lucy, a New York matchmaker skilled at pairing up demanding clients in search of someone with the height, good looks and income of their dreams. But even though she's made a career of playing Cupid, Lucy can't seem to find a partner of her own. When a charismatic (and unspeakably rich) prospective client named Harry (Pascal) confesses he's more interested in her than her services, it feels like the perfect match. That is, until she's reunited with her ex, John (Evans), and their shared history causes her to weigh up following her head or her heart. For Lucy, love is as quantifiable as primary-school maths — but her conflicting desires between John and Harry defy all calculations.

A playful subversion of the classic romcom, it exposes the ways modern dating has forced everyone to commodify themselves in the pursuit of love. And it is anchored by three leads whose chemistry amplifies the film's tensions: *Materialists* investigates why simply loving each other can feel like it's not enough to sustain a relationship.

Suitably, the trio are practically in each other's laps when they flop down on a sofa in a London studio to speak to *Empire* about their collaboration. Joined together hand-in-hand, they're so comfortable with each other, it's clear their professional collaboration has transformed into true friendship.

Let's start from when you all read the script for the first time. To borrow from Lucy's vernacular, what boxes did *Materialists* tick for you?
Dakota Johnson: The intelligence of the script and the plot. The way the story weaves through the lives of these people, and also Lucy's soul dilemma. It was less of the kind of surface-level romcoms I read these days, and more honest.
Chris Evans: For me, certainly the director box, the cast box, the location box. It just felt like a nice change of pace. I haven't done a movie like this in a little bit. It just felt right.
Pedro Pascal: I also love how it honours and subverts a genre. It's got very poignant things to say about the pursuit of status and looking for love in modern times — and in a city like New York. I love that because I want to be really entertained, but I also like it when my brain is fed.

This film really does feed your brain: it makes you think about love and dating through a completely new perspective. What conversations did it inspire among you?
Evans: In a weird way, the romcoms that we grow up watching are the things that inform us about how we want to pursue the love of our lives. But that's not always realistic, because you get to a certain point in your life where [you realise] it's not a movie. And sometimes you do want to check boxes because you want to think about a happy, comfortable, safe future. But that's not what your heart always wants. Those are tough things to confront. Personally, the reason I like John is because he really is just the hopeless romantic. He's the one who's just like, "Listen, I love you no matter what." I can relate to that.
Pascal: I kept on bringing up the idea of how tragic it is to measure your worth to status and to attach love to status or success. I think that this movie — at least in my experience of it — sheds a pretty good light on that futile pursuit.

On the subject of romcoms: Pedro, you were inspired by Harrison Ford's performance in *Working Girl*, which of course starred Dakota's mother [Melanie Griffith]. It's interesting to hold that film up against *Materialists* and think about what's changed and what hasn't.
Johnson: I don't think any film holds a candle to *Working Girl*. I just think it's perfect.

A24/Sony

Facing page, top to bottom: Old flames Lucy (Dakota Johnson) and John (Chris Evans); New horizons thanks to the paper-perfect Harry (Pedro Pascal); Director Celine Song with Johnson and Evans on set.

Pascal: I think it is my favourite romantic comedy.
Johnson: There are definitely similarities. Walking down the street briskly in a crowd full of people, I was very much like, "Wow, my mom did this when she was my age." It's a weird thing for me to compare, because I have a really different relationship with that movie.
Pascal: I think [Pascal's Harry and Ford's character Jack Trainer] are very different characters, and tonally they're different. I had to stay true to who Harry is in Celine's movie, but it was a great excuse to watch *Working Girl* again. I think [I was inspired] more by the spirit of being in a trinity with Chris and Dakota in New York City.

Lucy has a very pragmatic approach to romance. What did you all make of her as a character, and the effect she has on the others?
Johnson: To begin with, Lucy is very type-A and very focused on what she thinks will make her life feel amazing, aesthetically and materialistically. And then I think she transitions into feeling and moving through her life more with her soul and with her heart, rather than with her pragmatic mind.
Evans: It's nice for my character, because he's just lovesick. There were a lot of discussions I had with Celine about why John is so enamoured with Lucy. I get the first-love thing, but then, there's that scene where [Lucy tells John], "You're selfish, and you're not gonna want this, and I don't want it." (*To Johnson*) You kind of lay out the harsh truth that would be enough for most men to be like, "Alright, that's brutally honest, and I've got to move on." And he can't, and he doesn't. I remember saying, "Celine, why?" Because we don't ever see in the movie a flashback where they work. You don't see why they gel. And Celine just said that it represents that kind of inexplicable, irrational love. It's your heart. It can't be quantified, and that was enough for me. I thought that was really romantic and sweet.

How did you come to understand John's feelings for Lucy?
Evans: By asking Celine. The first step is to pitch: "Can we have an extra scene?" "Can we have a flashback?" "Can we tweak the dialogue?" Celine [said], "No, I'm going to give you the backstory, and it's only for you, and that should be enough." Sometimes you can't help but think, "Alright, I hope the audience understands the choices I'm making are predicated on a history that they might not know about" — but that's when you just gotta trust.

The film is very romantic, but it's also very practical, in that money is a big theme. Financial situations are a barrier to love, and the economics ›

Top left: Immaculate "unicorn" Harry. **Top right:** Friend-zoned? **Above:** Song and her leads.

of dating are as big a factor in relationships as attraction.
Pascal: Lucy is the main reason I wanted to do the movie, more so than reading my part. I think it's because [of] her lens on materialism and status, especially as it functions in the environment of New York City. She's very honest with herself and with everyone about a very specific way the world functions, but materially and actively neglects the uncontrollable way that the heart can determine what it needs from life which can't be quantified, which can't be bought, which can't be material. Lucy is the ultimate lens of that as a central character to me.
Johnson: I find all of that [money] really cringy, but it's really real, so it was something I had to really investigate and get my mind around.
Evans: I find that, oddly enough, in the profession that we're all in, it's so easy to make that your North Star. That's the thing that this life is about. Dedicating yourself to this art, which is always just out of reach, and the goalposts move and you really define success by your work. Having had some success in this industry... by no means have I climbed any mountains, but I've had enough to realise that it's not as fulfilling as the other things. The other things are what it's about. And there's something almost clarifying by being in this industry to realise that it's not what matters the most. And as a result, I find myself to be a hopeless romantic. I think the most important thing in the world is following your heart and finding love.
Pascal: Because it may lead you to me.
Johnson: And me!
Evans: That's right.
Johnson: We all clearly love each other.
Evans: We're gonna remake *The Dreamers*.

Chris, your character is a working actor. He supports himself with part-time jobs and lives in a dysfunctional shared flat. Did that take you back to when you first moved to Los Angeles?
Evans: Absolutely. In your early twenties, that's a point of pride, the fact that you don't have hot water and you live with eight guys and you're getting quarters out of the couch to pay the cable bill. There's something about that that almost feels like a rite of passage as an actor. But [John] is not in his early twenties anymore. The people around him have evolved, and the love of his life has evolved, and he has to stop making excuses because he just stays in the same place. And if he wants a life he wants to have, he has to push himself out of that comfort zone.

Pedro, did that resonate with your early career struggles?
Pascal: I was poor in New York longer than anyone in this room. (*Laughter*) I remember, I took a friend of mine to see this old apartment that I lived in, in Red Hook. I was still on the lease, and it was a matter of, "Do I renew or not?" I was already shooting *Narcos*, and she was doing a play in New York. She'd been doing well since the '90s, living in California, but also spent a good chunk of her time and career in New York. It's a really long story, but I took her there, and she had this look on her face, she looked like she was going to fucking cry. I was like, "You have an Eastern view of the rooftops, and if you lean all the way this way, you can see the Empire State Building!" She was literally mortified that I lived in that place for 12 years. It was held together by duct tape and shit.
Evans: Yeah, that sounds about right.

Harry is described as a "unicorn", the rare perfect partner. Pedro, how did you find the humanity in a character who has this veneer of perfection?
Pascal: The humanity was very easy to find because of the way Celine writes her characters, so I think they're right there... I was gonna say "throbbing". (*Laughter*)

Evans: Just veiny.
Pascal: Pulsating. In this material, I think the human part of all of these people is screaming to be seen, and so it was right there on the page.

When the three of you finally converge for the first time, there's a real energy shift. Did you feel that on set too?
Evans: I like playing moments like that. Especially where I'm from, there's such a strange alpha competitiveness among men.
Johnson: That's very Boston.
Evans: It's very Boston. You don't want to make it obvious. You almost want to have plausible deniability, but that's what makes it so dangerous. It's like, "Dude, that is so aggressive. Don't try and deny it." That's a very common energy.

> "The human part of all of these people is screaming to be seen."
> **Pedro Pascal**

Johnson: I loved it (*being together*). Like now.
Pascal: It did feel very natural to be on set with the two of them. I was hungry for it, really. I really wanted more to do.
Evans: Me too.
Pascal: Whether [our characters] got along or not, I just wanted to spend more screen-time with Chris.
Evans: Sequel!

In the scene where you're all together, Chris is performing in a play.
Evans: That's one of Celine's plays! The dialogue that I had to give is from one of her shows.
Pascal: Do you remember the name of the show? It had a title, I can't remember.
Evans: That's just those kinds of 'black-box theatre' [shows], really stripped-down, 50 seats. That takes me to my childhood.

The script has these really sharp and perceptive truisms about love. A personal favourite was, "Dating is hard, love is easy." Were there any lines that stayed with you?
Johnson: I liked the line, "You are not a catch because you are not a fish."
Evans: The one line that I really struggled with for a little while was, "I'm a beggar for you." But on the day, it just felt natural: the setting, the vibe, the couple of days Dakota and I had together during those scenes. It's just so easy to know that feeling of being like, "I'm just so helpless, and I just want you, and I can't tell you why. I can't help it." It's such a vulnerable thing to admit that.

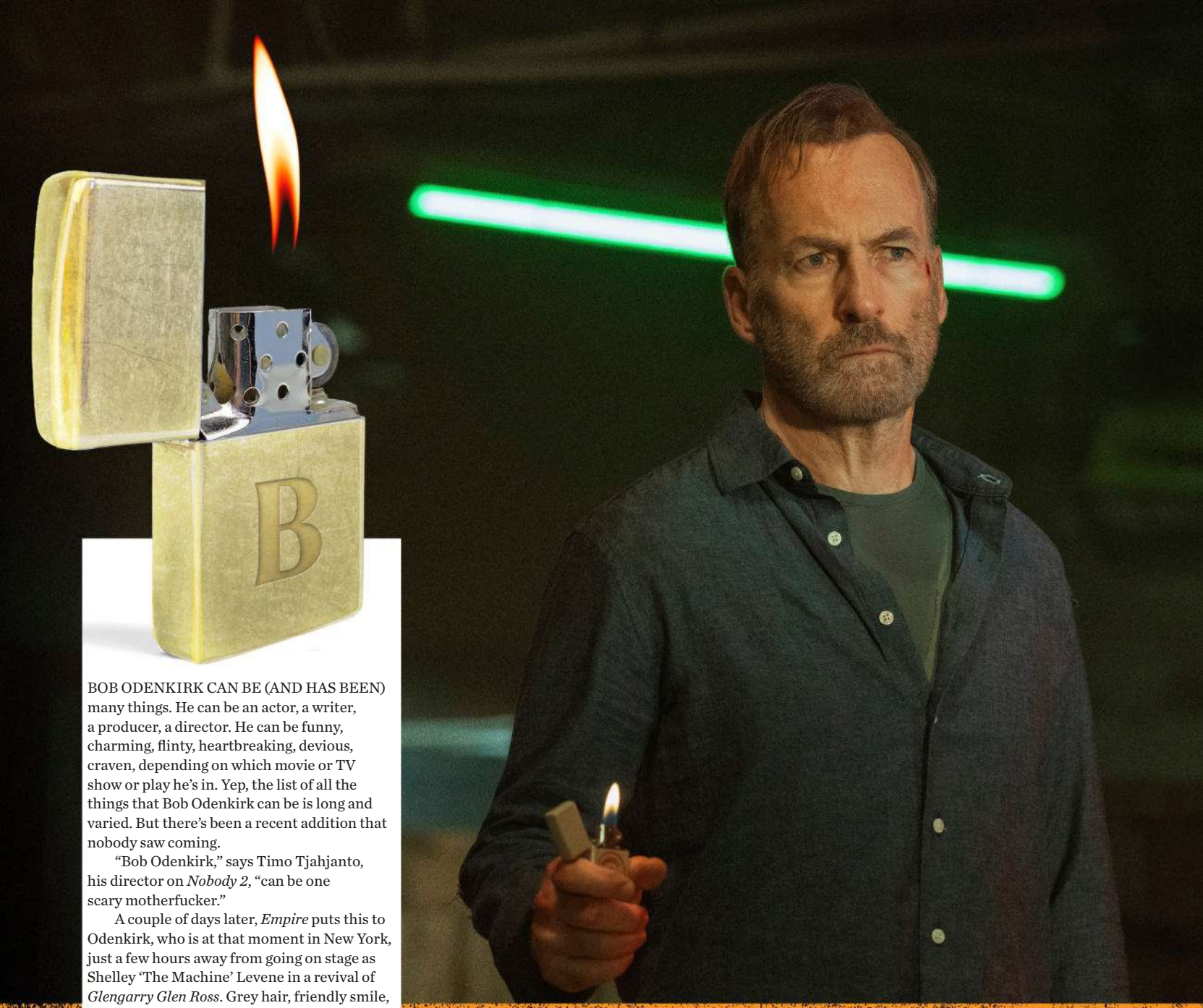
What are your favourite memories from the shoot?
Pascal: When's the last time that you shot in New York?
Johnson: A month ago.
Pascal: Before *Materialists*.
Johnson: It had been a while.
Pascal: I hadn't shot there since a *Law & Order* episode or something like that. There was something about being in all of the locations. Remember when we were downtown, we went to Ground Zero together, and we were looking for...
Johnson: Snacks.
Pascal: Snacks. And we got to just move around the city in different locations: downtown, the Upper West Side, Central Park. Remember that beautiful day when I went to your trailer and had a softy ice cream, and had eaten (*famed New York hot dog restaurant*) Gray's Papaya? We went and sat in the park, and that was amazing because it was a really beautiful day of spring. Chris tried to stab me in Brooklyn, and he had a ski-mask on, but he still had form-fitting clothes on so I could tell it was him. (*Laughter*)
Evans: You'd know that gait anywhere.

MATERIALISTS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 15 AUGUST

TURNING THE HEAT

THE FIRST FILM CAME OUT OF NOWHERE, BOB ODENKIRK BLINDSIDING US WITH AN OBSCENE AMOUNT OF WHOOP-ASS. NOW, WITH **NOBODY 2**, HE'S UP AGAINST A KNIFE-THROWING SHARON STONE. LET CARNAGE COMMENCE!

WORDS
CHRIS HEWITT



BOB ODENKIRK CAN BE (AND HAS BEEN) many things. He can be an actor, a writer, a producer, a director. He can be funny, charming, flinty, heartbreaking, devious, craven, depending on which movie or TV show or play he's in. Yep, the list of all the things that Bob Odenkirk can be is long and varied. But there's been a recent addition that nobody saw coming.

"Bob Odenkirk," says Timo Tjahjanto, his director on *Nobody 2*, "can be one scary motherfucker."

A couple of days later, *Empire* puts this to Odenkirk, who is at that moment in New York, just a few hours away from going on stage as Shelley 'The Machine' Levene in a revival of *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Grey hair, friendly smile, twinkly eyes — Odenkirk is as far removed from scary motherfuckerdom as it seems possible to get. But when he hears Tjahjanto's assessment, he smiles ruefully. "Well, it's a shame to say that's true," he sighs. "You know, my dad didn't give me much. He taught me how to swing a golf club, and he gave me this ability to go from zero to 80 in a second. I'm not thankful that that sometimes comes out in real life, because it's usually unhelpful and not appropriate. But in a movie, it works real well."

It certainly did back in 2021, when Odenkirk first displayed muscles (acting and actual) he didn't know he had, in *Nobody*. With *Better Call Saul*, the show which continued his run as fast-talking scumbag lawyer Saul Goodman that began on *Breaking Bad*, coming to an end, Odenkirk had taken a shot at becoming an action hero on the big screen. He played Hutch Mansell, a family man stuck in something of a rut until a home-invasion sparks something hidden beneath the surface. Long story short: Hutch is not a nobody but a somebody, a very lethal somebody. In fact, he's a former CIA assassin, with a particular set of skills, who suddenly finds himself in an all-out war with the Russian Mob. One that doesn't end well for the Russian Mob, but gives Hutch back his identity, rekindles his relationship with his wife Becca (Connie Nielsen), and even makes his kids look at their deadbeat dad with new eyes.

It was a cracker, directed by Ilya Naishuller and written by Derek Kolstad, the original writer of *John Wick*, with which it shared certain DNA, and a production company in Chad Stahelski and David Leitch's 87North. But *Nobody* stood apart from *Wick* and other geriaction movies for two reasons: its dark, often demented sense of humour, and Odenkirk, whose performance as Hutch was a revelation. Taking licks and dishing them out convincingly, most notably in a bus fight that has become iconic, suddenly *he* was the danger. *He* was the one who knocks. "I was a sketch-comedy guy," Odenkirk says now. "I was doing [*Nobody*] almost just as a crazy challenge, just

“I WANT IT TO BECOME A FANTASY. I WANT IT TO BECOME JAMES BOND.”

BOB ODENKIRK

Clockwise from main: Hutch Mansell (Bob Odenkirk) gets fired up; With Max (Lucius Hoyos); She’s the boss: Lendina (Sharon Stone) with Blofeld-style pal; The Mansells head off on hols; Hutch needs a lift; Director Timo Tjahjanto with Odenkirk

an older guy who sees a window to do something they’ve never done, and maybe could pull off.”

Nobody saw *Nobody* coming, but that’s partly because nobody saw *Nobody*. At least, not many people, not at first. When it came out in March 2021, it did so in the middle of the pandemic, at a time when huge blockbusters were struggling to put bums on seats, let alone an action movie starring the bloke from *Better Call Saul*. It made just $57 million worldwide, but you can’t keep a good nobody down. It *Little Engine That Could*-ed on home-entertainment formats, to the extent that Hutch is back. And this time he’s packing more than a punch. His swimming trunks, for one.

ODENKIRK WAS MORE THAN JUST THE star of *Nobody*. It sprang from him in many ways — he consciously wanted to try his hand at starring in an action movie, and was key in the film’s development. But it was also deeply personal to him — he and his family had once been the victims of not one but two home invasions. “Even though I think I did the right things in both instances,” Odenkirk told *Empire* back in 2020, “it doesn’t feel like enough, to be honest with you. It feels like I could have done more.” Those feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, and a desire to right some wrongs acted as the catalyst for Hutch and *Nobody*’s inciting incident.

Nobody 2, similarly, is pulled straight from Odenkirk’s memory banks. “My [birth] family went on two vacations in my life,” he says. “We went to the Wisconsin Dells, and we went to the Illinois State Fair one year, and that’s it.” The Wisconsin Dells is an area (you’ll never guess where it is) that’s home to numerous theme parks and entertainment centres. “We had a great time, although it was tense and difficult,” laughs Odenkirk. “The point is, those tense things, those mistakes, those dad things, they all got in the movie.”

So *Nobody 2* sees the Mansells hit the holiday road and head to a theme park called Plummerville. Unfortunately, Plummerville just happens to be a hotbed of criminal behaviour and, before you can say ‘National Lampoon’s Ultra-Violent Vacation’, Hutch has rubbed up the wrong people the wrong way, and finds himself beating the shit out of some bad guys with, among other things, a giant rubber duck. “A number of things inspired the first film,” says Odenkirk. “One of them was Jackie Chan’s *Police Story*. It’s one of the reasons I thought ‘action’ at all. And the duck-boat fight is the closest I’ve come to a Jackie Chan fight.”

The leaning into Chan-esque gymnastics was embraced by Indonesian director Tjahjanto, who makes his Hollywood debut here. “Hutch is an ass-kicker, but he’s not invincible,” says Tjahjanto. “He definitely gets his ass kicked a lot. So I said, ‘What if our approach is more like a Jackie Chan approach?’ What makes Jackie Chan special is he’s this guy who doesn’t want to fight, and people keep coming at him. Violence can often be modified in a certain way to make it funny.”

With films like *Headshot* and *The Night Comes For Us*, Tjahjanto made his name on unrelenting, uncompromising action sequences, usually filmed (or presented) in single, unbroken shots. They’re exhausting to watch. Imagine performing in them. Especially if you’re recovering from something that nobody, least of all Odenkirk, saw coming.

IT WAS A HEART ATTACK. A BIG ONE.

Odenkirk was hanging out in-between takes on set of the final season of *Better Call* ›

“IF YOU’RE GOING TO THROW KNIVES, THROW REAL KNIVES.”

SHARON STONE

Saul when it went down, and so did he. “One of the tributaries to my widowmaker artery was completely shut down,” he says. “I fell unconscious. I turned grey. Worse things happened that I don’t want to say. I stopped breathing. If I’d been in my trailer, I would have been dead in short time, or had brain damage.”

Luckily, he was surrounded by people, and with the help of CPR and a defibrillator (and, later, the insertion of a couple of stents), he came back from the brink. That was 27 July 2021, about four months after *Nobody* was released, and Odenkirk has moved with the energy of a much younger man since, wrapping up *Better Call Saul*, moving onto short-lived TV show *Lucky Hank*, bagging a Tony nomination for *Glengarry*. And, of course, beating the crap out of assorted goons, henchmen and ne’er-do-wells in *Nobody 2*. All at the age of 62. “We never really spoke about his heart attack,” says Tjahjanto. “I like to push my actors to the limit. Sometimes it’s bordering on torture. But honestly, Bob could do three consecutive days of just doing the fight stuff. After the second day I’m ready to conk out, and Bob’s still going. That speaks more about his discipline.”

Odenkirk has a different take on things. For him, *Nobody 2* wasn’t a risk. As far as he’s concerned, the only reason he’s alive to even do *Nobody 2* is because of *Nobody*. “There’s almost no scarring on my heart after all that,” he says. “And the reason is, according to the nurse and my cardio doctor, is that these other veins that feed your heart were somewhat enlarged. They’re bigger than you normally see, and that was because of the two-and-a-half years of training for *Nobody*. I can work out. I do two a day when I’m training for the movie.”

In Indonesia, Tjahjanto has worked with the likes of Iko Uwais and Joe Taslim, actors who are also exceptional martial artists. The kind of people you can plonk the camera on, ask them to go for a few minutes, over and over again. Bordering on torture, indeed. If his plan with Odenkirk was to take things easy and cut him some slack, that quickly changed. A lot of the action scenes in *Nobody 2* will showcase Odenkirk strutting his stuff in a single take, camera on his face in a way that it’s hard to cut around. “Bob is good at memorising all the choreography,” says Tjahjanto. “I’ll go, ‘Hey, Bob, I’ll give you two beats — punch, kick.’ And he’s like, ‘No, Timo, let’s go five beats, *boom boom boom boom boom*.’” Tjahjanto laughs. “I sometimes feel like if Bob wasn’t a comedian, he could be one of those MMA guys. He feels leathery. He feels like a tough guy, with the freakin’ veins popping out of his biceps.” And we’re back to Bob Odenkirk: Scary Motherfucker again. ‘Better Kill Saul’, anyone?

But this time around it’s not enough for Hutch to work his way through an army of anonymous henchmen, whether or not he’s smacking them with a fairground mallet or a giant duck. *Nobody* was memorable because it gave Odenkirk a nemesis of equal ability, in Aleksey Serebryakov’s unhinged Russian mobster. For the sequel, Odenkirk needed a Big Bad who could go toe-to-toe with him in every sense. “I want it to become a fantasy,”

Clockwise from main: Knife out!: Lendina looking sharp; Sheriff Abel (Colin Hanks) finds something of interest; Hutch even more fired up; Fairground fisticuffs for Max and Brady (Gage Munroe); Sword-play: Harry Mansell (RZA) unleashes his *katana*.

says Odenkirk. "I want it to become James Bond, and I want the villain to be as big and colourful and unreal as a James Bond villain." Enter a Hollywood legend. Was it someone that nobody saw coming? You'd better believe it.

SHARON STONE CAN BE ONE SCARY motherfucker, too. This is a woman who's duelled with Gene Hackman, kicked the crap out of Arnie (even if that little skirmish ultimately ended in divorce), outwitted Michael Douglas, and got her claws into Halle Berry's Catwoman (although it's probably best not to mention that one). But action roles had, over the last decade or so, passed her by. You'd assume that that was mostly due to good old-fashioned Hollywood ageism, that dread disease that renders female actors invisible once they hit 50. And there's an element of that for sure. But Stone has also been recovering from her own life-or-death struggle. "Twenty years ago I had a stroke," she tells *Empire*, on Zoom from her LA home. "And I started over, and I haven't done an action movie since then."

Until *Nobody 2* came calling, with an offer to play Lendina, the ferocious figurehead of the crime organisation that has planted its roots in Plummerville. "I literally did not know, 'Do I still have her in me?'" admits Stone. "'Am I going to be able to come in here and make people believe that I can be this ass-kicking hyper-villain?'"

She said yes, of course, tempted by a chance to test her action mettle all over again, and lured in by a genuine love for *Nobody*, which she had seen six times with her kids during the pandemic. "When I was up for it, my kids were out of their minds," she says. Working with Odenkirk was also a big draw. "He's a good guy," she says. "I love the work, Odenkirk loves his work. He's like De Niro, working to work better." Although she wasn't prepared for one of the side effects of working with Odenkirk. "I keep getting all these Instagrams [comments]," she laughs. "'He's so sexy', 'He's so hot', 'Oh my God, Bob is so hot'. I forward them to Bob and I'm like, 'I have no opinion on this, Bob, but clearly everyone thinks you're a hot tomato now, in your midlife resurgence. Now you're a hot man.' And I love getting to kick the ass of his hot manhood." Blimey.

Odenkirk isn't sure whose idea it was to cast Stone as the kicker-in-chief of his hot manhood. He thinks it might be his. Tjahjanto admits that he had Stone on his wishlist, but didn't think she would say yes. "I thought we could never get Sharon Stone," says the director. "We sent a script and a couple of days later I was sitting on her couch, telling her about this character. She was like, 'Alright, Timo, I'm fucking in.' It was surreal." On set, Tjahjanto would regularly ask Stone about *The Quick And The Dead*, the 1995 Sam Raimi Western in which she starred.

Nobody 2 treats the wily, unpredictable Lendina ("She's like a snake," adds Tjahjanto. "Sometimes she plays it calm and sometimes she just goes batshit crazy!") like a final boss, pulling strings behind the scenes, directing her private militia (and squadron of female bodyguards) against Hutch and his family (once again including Christopher Lloyd, as Hutch's dad David, and RZA as his sword-wielding brother Harry). She and Hutch are kept apart for much of the movie. When they eventually butt heads, there will be fireworks. "She's in great shape, and she can fight, and she can push you around," says Odenkirk of Stone. "And she's powerful. She never stops thinking. She might as well be a 22-year-old comedy writer, for all the thoughts and ideas going through her head."

What will this showdown between Hutch and Lendina be like? Imagine *Heat*, but if instead of going for a cup of coffee, Pacino and De Niro started throwing knives at each other. "I've been in the action-movie business for a really long time," says Stone. "I was getting really frustrated because the stunt team was having me throw a bunch of fucking rubber knives. If you're going to throw knives, throw real knives." Welcome back, Shazza. You've been missed.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that it's unlikely that Stone will be around for any potential 'Nobody 3'. But Odenkirk enjoyed working with her so much that he has an idea up his sleeve, something that will keep this unlikely partnership on the road. "We're trying to think of another movie we can do together," he says. "I have an idea that I've been kicking around. A very low-key comedy." Nobody saw that... well, you can guess the rest.

***NOBODY 2* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 15 AUGUST**

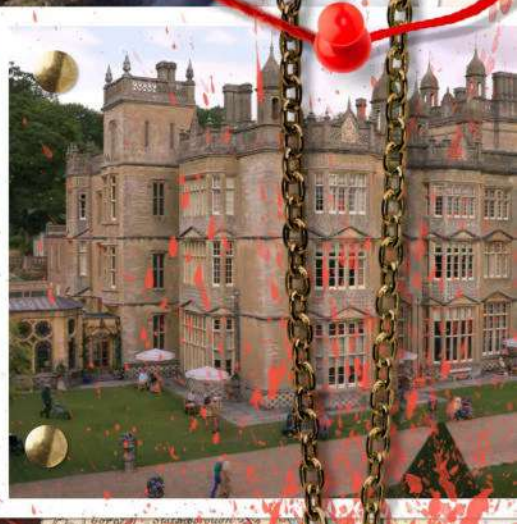
THE GREAT BRITISH KILL-OFF

The novel, about a team of silver-haired sleuths, was a global sensation...

that record breaking teen

Now, as THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB becomes a movie, we interrogate the all-star suspects.

Biscuit, anybody?



WORDS **IAN FREER**

Kent Police

DCI CHRIS HUDSON

"What a delightful way to spend a summer."

It's 27 August 2024, and Pierce Brosnan is clearly content in the twilight of a long day's filming on *The Thursday Murder Club*. We are chatting in the beautiful gardens of Englefield House, an imposing, impressive mansion in Theale, west of Reading. You might have seen it in *X-Men: First Class*, playing Xavier Academy, but today the Estate is doubling for the Kent retirement village of Coopers Chase, the heart of Richard Osman's senior-sleuths-solve-crimes bestseller. Brosnan plays retired trade union leader Ron Ritchie, who, along with formidable former spy Elizabeth Best (Helen Mirren), compassionate ex-psychiatrist Ibrahim Arif (Sir Ben Kingsley) and sweet-natured past nurse Joyce Meadowcroft (Celia Imrie), meet on Thursday nights to crack unsolved historical killings — until they are propelled into their first live case. Despite the fading light, it's easy to see the twinkle in Brosnan's eye.

"We don't wish to be doing jigsaws, water aerobics or any of that nonsense," he explains about the delicious premise. "We like the world of murder and death and mayhem."

Earlier in the day, *Empire* has been watching Mirren's Elizabeth, the gang's no-nonsense leader, filming the climax of the movie, jumping out of a speeding police car and hot-footing it into the palatial estate. "It's a little bit of action," she explains. "The *Fast & Furious* in the middle of *The Thursday Murder Club*." Director Chris Columbus, decked out in the filmmakers' drip of black cap, plaid shirt and dark jeans, claps his hands like an enthusiastic audience member.

"It was the Mount Rushmore of the British Acting Giants," he says, some months later, about his stacked cast. "I was intimidated, but once we started working on the script, the four of them together was just magical. They were all really looking forward to working together in a really exciting, almost youthful way."

Watching over the proceedings from afar is Richard Osman, the reason we are all here. Previously best known as question-asker on tea-time fixtures *Pointless* and *Richard Osman's House Of Games*, Osman's pension-meets-tension crime debut ignited a ten-way publishing bidding war, ultimately selling for a seven-figure sum. It became an international book-buster which has all led him to a sunny day in the home counties, enjoying an A-list cast and director busting their ass off to bring his creations to the screen.

"I'm an executive producer [on the film], and after many years working in television, I know full well what executive producers do — which is fuck all," he says. "I'm proud to say that's what I've been doing on set."

Before he became the on-screen brains of BBC quizzes, Osman was a successful TV executive at production company Endemol, becoming a master of the fresh, compelling, franchise-able format. Of course, if anyone loves a fresh, compelling, franchise-able format, it is the movie industry. So Osman sold his crackerjack idea to the *de facto* president of Hollywood.

IN MID-AUGUST, AROUND HALFWAY through the shoot, a helicopter buzzed the Berkshire sky. Silhouetted by a blazing sun, the chopper landed and delivered Steven Spielberg to Englefield Estate's 12 acres of grounds. "It was like God out of the heavens," laughs Mirren. Kingsley warmly greeted his *Schindler's List* director, Osman thanked him "for the joy he has brought to the world", and Imrie presented him with a picture of herself in Bruce the shark's mouth (one of the actual mechanical props from *Jaws* — Imrie was on a private tour of Universal Studios in 1974, saw the thing and climbed in). "He was absolutely thrilled," she says. "My temperature went up sky high." But the visit was perhaps most meaningful to Columbus. Despite having written *Gremlins*, *Young Sherlock Holmes*

Clockwise from main: Sleuths Joyce (Celia Imrie), Ron (Pierce Brosnan) and Ibrahim (Sir Ben Kingsley) flanked by PC Donna de Freitas (Naomi Ackie) and Ron's son Jason (Tom Ellis); DCI Chris Hudson (Daniel Mays) and Donna; Stephen (Jonathan Pryce) and handyman Bogdan (Henry Lloyd-Hughes); Bogdan with Elizabeth Best (Helen Mirren); Death on the doorstep; Mirren with director Chris Columbus.

and *The Goonies*, plus co-produced *The Help* for Amblin, the filmmaker had never had Spielberg visit one of his sets.

"This was the first time he was supporting me as a director," remembers Columbus. "It was very, very emotional when he came, the two of us reuniting and talking about those early days back at Amblin. Steven was actually taking videos of me directing on the set, and he sent me two of the videos. It was just a wonderful, wonderful moment. We thought he was staying for an hour. He stayed for almost three hours."

Amblin optioned Osman's opus long before the book hit the shelves in September 2020. "I was still thinking, 'What is this book?'" recalls Osman. "I knew I liked it but the fact that Spielberg, who you have to respect above almost anyone in terms of character and story, came in to buy it gave me an enormous amount of confidence. And also, with all due respect to every single other company who bid for it, when Spielberg's in, you're gonna say yes to Spielberg."

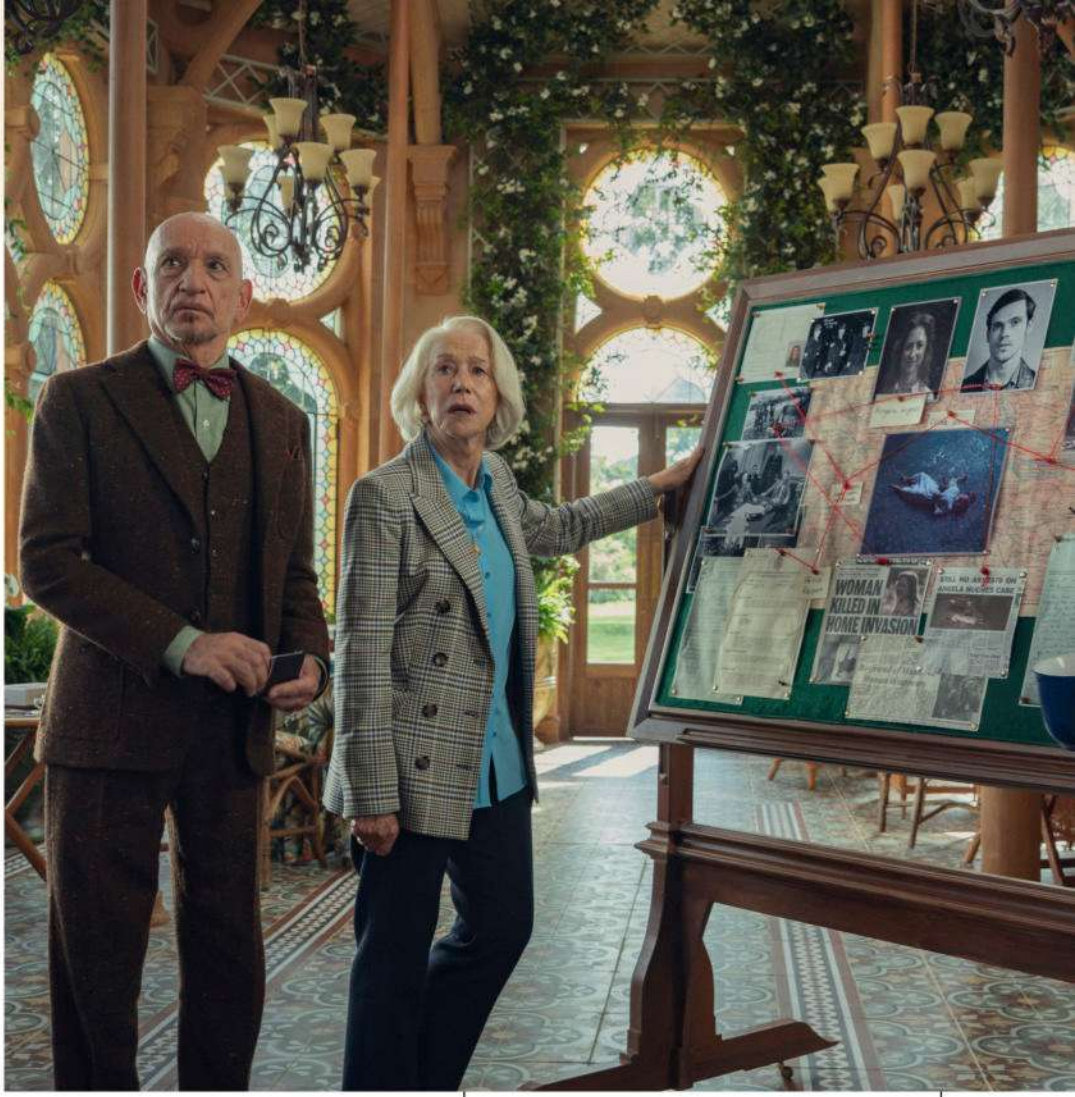
Spielberg flirted with directing it. Ol Parker, director of *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*, was at one point attached. But ultimately the gig went to Columbus, who, having directed the first two Harry Potter films, has form in bringing beloved British novels to the screen. In Prague, producing Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu*, he discovered a little English bookstore and stumbled across Osman's book, and it was love at first sight. "What really struck me about it was the fact that it was a murder-mystery with an intense emotional core, which is rare. Generally, murder-mysteries tend to be a little cold, a little distancing, a little procedural. I love the fact that there was something else much more complex going on at the heart of this film. I also really responded to the edginess of the humour."

Yet Columbus was initially hesitant to do another adaptation following his experience on *Percy Jackson & The Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. "I was never in love with those books, to be quite honest with you," he levels. "It wasn't the most pleasant experience because I had to change so much of what exists in those books to make them work cinematically. I didn't know if I wanted to tackle another novel. And then this came along and I felt the same sort of love I had for *Harry Potter*. I just knew I had to be incredibly faithful."

While Columbus says he developed "a fantastic relationship" with the author, Osman is adamant he is keeping his creative distance.

"I've already told my version of this story, which is the book that's out there," he says. "So, this to me is gravy. I'm not getting involved, because you've either got to be 100 per cent involved or 0 per cent involved. You can't be slightly pregnant. I've had my go at it, and I'm happy with the way mine ended up. Now it's lovely to see other people have their go at the source material."

The "source material" is tonally a tricksy proposition, at once light and layered, as English as apple crumble and Stormzy. And for now it was primarily in the hands of — whisper it — *Americans*. ›



SHAPED BY OSMAN'S LOVE OF *THE A-TEAM*, *The Thursday Murder Club* was inspired by the people he met and stories he heard while visiting his mother Brenda at the St. George's Park retirement village in East Sussex, and realising the residents were perfectly placed to solve crimes: intelligent, resourceful, experienced and under-estimated. (For the record, Thursdays in the real St. George's Park revolve around the Knit And Natter Club.)

As well as being a gripping, twist-y-turn-y mystery told in short, punchy chapters, one key to the book's runaway success is its refreshing attitude towards its elderly *dramatis personae*. "We all look at older people and we just cannot grasp the fact that they had a life before that was similar to our life," says Mirren, who was a big fan of the book before the movie was announced. "That they had sex and they were productive, and they made mistakes, and they did brilliant things, and they were human beings, just like us. It's weirdly difficult for people to grasp that fact. And I think the lovely thing *The Thursday Murder Club* says is, 'Yes, these are older people, but they are extremely smart, and they are productive and creative, just like anyone.'"

If you haven't read *The Thursday Murder Club*, you might think it's like one of those Sunday-night ITV dramas called something like 'Scone And Cream' (Miriam Margolyes is Jan Scone! Joanna Lumley is Carol Cream!) where veteran librarians crack crimes in sleepy villages to a *pizzicato* strings score. But you'd be wrong. "It's not froth," says Imrie. "The wit of it keeps it elevated." The feel is reflected in the visuals, Columbus drawing inspiration from an unlikely source.

"We want this film to have integrity and guts in its visual style," he says. "Believe it or not, I took a lot of information from *Nosferatu* for *The Thursday Murder Club*. The look of the lighting was inspirational in making absolutely sure that the film didn't have too bright a glow, that it lived in shadows. If you look at certain close-ups, the way they're lit from certain windows, you'd see that there is a connective tissue there."

Contrasting the darkness is still a very English sensibility. "That really attracted me," says Kingsley. "Our idiosyncrasies are the countryside, the houses, the quirkiness of it. I really responded to that warm toast and tea-time Englishness about it." Yet this isn't just an homage to the Blighty of yesteryear. Osman's book is chock-full of modern Britishisms to keep things sharp and contemporary. "My daughter," says the author, "who speaks Chinese, was just reading the Chinese version and she said literally half of the pages are footnotes: 'Who is Nigella Lawson?' 'What is Taste The Difference'? 'What's Oliver Bonas'?"

After initial conversations with Amblin, Osman was satisfied Elizabeth, Joyce *et al* were not going to be transported to a gated community in Florida. "I thought they would be stupid to not make it British," he says, "and I knew they weren't stupid." Counting *A Hard Day's Night*, *O Lucky Man!* and David Lean's *Great Expectations* as favourites, Columbus admits he is "obsessed" with British cinema. Still, despite his bona fide Anglophile status, some things did get lost in translation. "Pierce used this word for his character. I had no idea what it meant. And when I asked him, I was horrified. It was a word called '*plonker*'. When he explained it, I was stunned, but I lean into that greatly."

While the casting has mostly been rapturously received by the fanbase (the series has sold ten million copies and counting), it was the announcement of Brosnan that raised the most eyebrows. Could the ultra-swish former 007 pull off a "plonker"?

ON THE PAGE, 'RED' RON RITCHIE IS AN ex-trade-union firebrand, with big, bullish opinions and a West Ham neck tattoo. On screen, from Remington Steele to James Bond to Thomas Crown, to his turn in this year's *Black Bag*, Pierce Brosnan is the epitome of suave, smooth sophistication. It was Columbus' idea to go with him, having worked with the actor on both *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *Percy Jackson*. "I was blown away by his comedic timing on *Mrs. Doubtfire*," he says. "He could hold his own with Robin Williams. I've always wanted to do another comedy with Pierce."

Brosnan admits the role has been flecked with a little trademark Bron-Hom charisma. "They've taken a lot from my own quiver as an actor," he says. "He's a ladies' man. There's light touches there." The actor also gets the author's seal of approval. "You have to do something unusual and different and interesting," says Osman. "Here's the key thing about Pierce Brosnan playing Ron: Pierce Brosnan is who Ron would choose to play Ron. In the next book, I've got a scene with Ron and Ibrahim discussing who the best Bond is, and Ron is very much a Pierce Brosnan man. And Ibrahim is Timothy Dalton. For me, that's the joy." Brosnan guffaws when *Empire* informs him of the reference. "That's bloody great," he responds. "I love it. Timothy Dalton was a fantastic Bond. Brosnan wasn't half bad either."

Clockwise from far left: A startled Donna; Keeping it old-school; Former boxer Jason is now a reality-TV star; Pensioner PIs Elizabeth and Joyce; Former trade unionist Ron squares up to Ian (David Tennant), the co-owner of Coopers Chase, at a picket line.

The double-act between Ron and Ibrahim is central to *The Thursday Murder Club*. "These are men who would never have encountered each other in day-to-day living, but they are brought together here by their age and time of life," says Brosnan. "We strike a relationship that's made of love and kinship. Sir Ben and I are both great fans of Laurel and Hardy, so we've decided we are both Stans." Kingsley, who notes "my working relationship with Pierce is one of the best working relationships I've ever had in my career", reveals the Stan-and-Ollie vibe spilled over in-between takes. "We actually sang 'The Trail Of The Lonesome Pine' together, and he banged me on the head and I went falsetto. We shared a trust that means we could go into a Laurel-and-Hardy riff at a moment's notice, because we understood each other's working rhythm."

With around 200 years of acting experience between the foursome, there are a number of links between the group — which Kingsley feels can be a risk. "Over-familiarity can actually make the scene a little dead, because you're not projecting to the audience, you're just sharing it with each other," he says. "Discovering Pierce, Celia and re-discovering Helen was really a delight. I hope the cameras caught that." Imrie played opposite Mirren in *Calendar Girls*, which proved a useful primer for her new character. "I was a bit scared of Helen when I first met her because I revered her for so many years," says Imrie. "It mirrors the way Joyce is in awe of Elizabeth, especially at the beginning. Helen was an absolute delight on this film."

All four Murder Clubbers agree the quartet formed a bond similar to a theatrical ensemble, partly forged by a shared approach to the work. "We got on well very swiftly," says Imrie. "I don't ever want to talk about, 'In our day blah blah blah...' but we do just get on with it and that's rather marvellous." At the end of the shoot, Brosnan, a lifelong artist, presented his cast-mates with artworks. "He's a wonderful artist, the real deal," says Mirren. "It sounds rather suspicious but I loved to go up and see his etchings anytime he asked me." For Brosnan, who came back to Britain after years working Stateside, it was an emotional homecoming. "*The Thursday Murder Club* has been a great joy and a great comfort," he says. "The closest thing would be *Mamma Mia!*. This is *Mamma Mia!* but without the songs. I suggested I sing, but no-one picked up on that. It is a comedy, remember."

While 'The Thursday Murder Club: The Musical' is not in the offing any time soon, there are four more books waiting to be adapted, and a stage version (same characters, new story) in the works. Speak to anyone involved and they would jump at the chance to return to Coopers Chase. "I'd love to spend every summer from now to the day I die playing Elizabeth," says Mirren, encapsulating the warmth around the project. As the other A-Team might say: Don't you just love it when a plan comes together?

***THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 28 AUGUST**

THE DAILY SHOW

Settle in for a day-of-the-week movie marathon

10AM-12PM
WHAT HAPPENED TO MONDAY 2017
Kick off with this under-seen sci-fi thriller about septuplets (all played by Noomi Rapace) named after the days of the week. The title is inspired by spending a Bank Holiday in IKEA.

12-2PM
IF IT'S TUESDAY THIS MUST BE BELGIUM 1969
Pick things up with a madcap whirlwind tour of Europe starring Murray '*Jaws*' Hamilton and Ian '*Lovejoy*' McShane. The easiest, cheapest way to see the entire continent, post-Brexit.

2-4PM
BIG WEDNESDAY 1978
Faced with the hump-day of this movie marathon, try John Milius' invigorating surfing-buddies bonanza. It's named after the surfer-dude myth that the largest swells always land on Wednesdays. Bit like *Race Across The World*.

4-6PM
THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB 2025
Go for a gentler vibe with the septuagenarian sleuths trying to solve a crime that might save their retirement home. As tea-time-friendly as Mr. Kipling and Tetley.

6-8PM
FRIDAY 1995
As the evening kicks in, ramp things up with this Ice Cube comedy, a kind of vaudeville version of *Boyz N The Hood*. Randomly, it's one of Tarantino's top 20 films made between 1992 and 2009.

8-10PM
SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER 1977
Dig out the white suit and the disco ball: John Travolta's Tony Manero will keep the energy started by Cube. Ah ha ha ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive.

10PM-12AM
ANY GIVEN SUNDAY 1999
Flagging? Al Pacino monologuing about going "inch by inch" is the perfect wake-up call. Oliver Stone's star-studded grid-iron great will keep you going to the end. Goodnight.

DIFFERENT BEAT

HAVING SPENT YEARS ENSCONCED IN HORROR, DIRECTOR MIKE FLANAGAN MINES SWEETER MATERIAL WITH EXISTENTIAL COSMIC DRAMA THE LIFE OF CHUCK. WE JOIN HIM AND STAR TOM HIDDLESTON TO TALK LIFE, DEATH AND DANCING WORDS **AL HORNER**

Clockwise from main: Haunted divorcé Marty (Chiwetel Ejiofor); Young Chuck (Benjamin Pajak); Director Mike Flanagan chats on set as Tom Hiddleston looks on; Adult Chuck (Hiddleston) struts his stuff with stranger Janice (Annalise Basso); Young Chuck at prom with close pal Cat (Trinity Bliss); Marty's ex-wife Felicia (Karen Gillan).

M

Mike Flanagan knows the word "feel-good" isn't often associated with the apocalypse. Nor, to be honest, with his work as one of the era's premier fright-masters; a writer-director whose oeuvre has so far included vampire priests (*Midnight Mass*), acid showers (*The Fall Of The House Of Usher*) and some of the most brutal small-screen deaths of all time (*The Haunting Of Hill House*).

It's not how you'd typically describe the icon of literary terror he's becoming closely associated with, either. Flanagan's latest film, *The Life Of Chuck*, adapted from a 2010 Stephen King novella, is the third time he's brought the legendary author's words to the screen, after *Gerald's Game* and *Doctor Sleep*, with new adaptations of *Carrie* and *The Dark Tower* also on the way.

But *The Life Of Chuck* is, nonetheless, as feel-good as apocalypse stories come. A meditative, non-linear, cosmic drama, it stars Tom Hiddleston as Chuck Krantz — a seemingly ordinary man who mysteriously begins appearing on billboards as divorced couple Felicia (Karen Gillan) and Marty's (Chiwetel Ejiofor) leafy suburban existence is interrupted by a series of globe-threatening disasters. The mystery of "Who is Chuck?" propels a story more still and sentimental than many viewers might expect from Flanagan, from King, from the end of the world.

"It's a film about life in consideration of death. Because consideration of death inspires appreciation of life," says Hiddleston, who embodies that with a major scene involving the most elaborate dance sequence this side of *Sinners*' juke-joint blow-out. He and Flanagan sat down with *Empire* to discuss hope, grief, and why the most surprisingly life-affirming film of the year might owe it all to *Alan Carr: Chatty Man*...

You've each described crying the first time you read this story. What was it that hit you both so profoundly?

Mike Flanagan: Where the world was at the time, reading the novella in April 2020 at the start of the pandemic had a very uncomfortable overlap with the beginning of the story. I very much felt like the world was ending outside the window, and that there was no way to know how we would get back from where we seemed to be going. There was a lot of anxiety and a lot of dread at the time that made the story very difficult for me to read, initially. But by the time I got to the end, what made me cry wasn't the despair or the anxiety — it was its overwhelming sense of optimism and joy and hope. That's what really resonated with me. The idea that I could have been so unexpectedly lifted up from that place that I was in when I sat down to read it... there are very few stories I've ever come across in my life that have had that power. Tom, I don't know about you...?

Tom Hiddleston: It encapsulated something I've always believed about life, which is that there's no such thing as an ordinary life. Every seemingly ordinary human being contains a soul of infinite possibility and magic. I don't mean to be sentimental or maudlin, but I do believe that inside every person is this unique constellation of memories and connections to people and places, literature and music and movies and art. And when that life comes to an end, those stars fade away. And that's really why I wanted to be part of this film. It was so profound, what it was saying, and it was saying it in a thrilling and dynamic and cinematic way.

The film captures something timely. The opening act is essentially a disaster movie, in which it's not one single catastrophe threatening humanity, but a cascade of them. That's sort of what it feels like to turn on the news today, isn't it?

Flanagan: It's interesting — we've heard it from a few people who talk about how relevant that [detail] feels right now. But you know, there was no way that King could have predicted where the world was heading. Covid wasn't even a thing when he wrote it. But it still feels like it's speaking to our reality.

In real life, experiencing that constant treadmill of calamity — war, climate disaster, political upheaval — do you often wonder if we're in 'the last times', as it's

described in *The Life Of Chuck*? And if so, did that influence the film in any way?
Hiddleston: You know, I wonder if it may always have felt like this, just a bit different. The First World War must have been horrendous. Then almost an entire generation of young men were wiped out in the Second World War. The Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, various depressions throughout the 20th century... there's always an external anxiety located somewhere in the world that's destabilising and distressing. What's unique about the time we live in now is that our technologies have made us all aware of the fragility of life everywhere in the world, at every second in every minute of every hour of every day.
Flanagan: I want to hope every generation thinks the world is ending — I *really* want to hope that, especially as a parent. I've been revisiting Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's Vietnam War documentary [*The Vietnam War*] lately, and there's a whole section [in that about] America in 1968, where you've got assassinations and the police beating American students to death. Looking at that, there's a sense that it must have felt like the world was ending. And yet, the world carried on. I think [every generation] feels like the centre isn't holding and that the wheels are coming off. I do struggle with all this while having kids, though — hoping they're not going to inherit an existence that's on fire.

Parenthood amid apocalypse is a theme of the movie — Chuck's uncle, played by ›

Above, left to right: Uncle Albie (Mark Hamill) lends an ear; Chuck and Janice get into the groove. **Right, top to bottom:** Felicia has questions; Young Chuck puts grandmother Sarah (Mia Sara) through her paces; Marty watches the world fall apart.

Mark Hamill, and Chiwetel Ejiofor's teacher are both character helping raise children in an uncertain world. Tom, you became a parent in the run-up to making *The Life Of Chuck*, and Mike, you're a father of three — one of whom, Cody, has a cameo in the film. Was there anything from your own experiences of fatherhood you brought to the movie?

Hiddleston: It's something Mike and I discussed at our first meeting. Becoming a father to my son is without question the most important and meaningful thing that has ever happened to me. I don't yet know how to talk about it publicly, without somehow diminishing or reducing it... All I know is that becoming a father is the most important thing I will ever do. The joy in the film is what I hope and want to be available for my son. The joy and the love in the film is what I want him to feel in the world. There is so much wisdom in *The Life Of Chuck*... It was impossible not to feel all of that, as a father.

Flanagan: Yes. I don't know that the story would have resonated with me the same were I not a father. I certainly don't think I would have approached the story the way I did without that lens of parenthood. I don't think that at all limits the impact of this story on people — I think I would have been just as moved by the story if I had read it 20 years ago, before I had children. But I certainly think it informed how I approached it.

One of the most memorable sequences involves Chuck dancing to a busking drummer outside a strip mall. Mike, there's a 2013 viral video of Tom dancing on the UK comedy show *Alan Carr: Chatty Man* — is that what convinced you he had the right moves?

Hiddleston: Oh no, don't bring that up! (*Laughs*)

Flanagan: I actually had seen those clips of Tom dancing! And the thing that leapt out to me immediately in them was that he was so visibly, authentically and earnestly joyful, and that's what the scene hinged on. It wasn't about someone who could do the most technically perfect dance in the world. It was about someone who was expressing with every kind of cell in their body this joy of being alive in that moment. And you can feel the joy radiating off Tom in those videos.

The scene is the apex of the movie, and a huge technical challenge — Tom, you've talked about burning holes in your shoes while shooting the sequence, such was the intensity of the choreography. What does that moment in the film mean to you both?

Hiddleston: When I was young, we had two VHS cassettes in our house. One was a production of *The Nutcracker* by the Royal Scottish Ballet. And one was the animated short film of Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman*. One moment from that is emblazoned in my imagination. Obviously, the snowman magically comes to life and takes the young boy flying across the world to see Father Christmas. But before that, there's a party with all the other snowmen and they're dancing. It's a moment of such innocent joy — they're spinning and twirling and reeling and leaping. That's one of my earliest memories. So, dancing has always been something I love to do. But I've never danced like this before! The challenge of doing it and doing it well — having to learn the many different styles and techniques: jazz, swing, cha-cha, salsa, samba, Charleston, bossa nova, polka — it was quite something. Annalise [Basso, playing a stranger Chuck dances with] and PQ [drummer The Pocket Queen] and I have still got a WhatsApp group called 'Buskers Forever' because it was so special.

Flanagan: The movie lives or dies on that number. If it didn't work — if the joy of that scene wasn't contagious, or if it was inauthentic, or if Tom and Annalise were miserable while shooting it, I don't think the movie would work. I think we'd feel that, even if they technically nailed the dance, so it was really important that these were people who were unafraid to allow joy to animate them. The pure happiness that Tom and Annalise were expressing and channelling, it was absolutely viral. All of us watching it on the monitor felt it. My face was in pain from smiling. By the end of the week, my smile muscles were so sore.

You probably didn't get that making *Midnight Mass* or *The Fall Of The House Of Usher*...

Flanagan: Right? If I was smiling 'til my face hurt while making *Doctor Sleep*, I would be a psychopath. (*Laughs*)

On that note, Mike — you seem to be somewhat stepping out into the unknown with this film. You're a filmmaker known for horror, and *The Life Of Chuck* has some supernatural flourishes, but none of your typical jump scares. Was it daunting at all, leaving those genre elements behind?

Flanagan: Honestly, my process is always

exactly the same. Whether it's a horror movie or not, my priority is always the characters, and whether what I'm seeing on the monitor feels honest — whether we're communicating the ultimate kind of message of the story properly. I did have the feeling after filming the dance scene that I wanted to be doing a lot more of this [sort of thing] in my career — I want to be in a place where sitting on set allows me to feel that happy. That said, I love horror and will always be drawn to it. I actually immediately stepped off this project and back into that world (*with his takes on* The Exorcist *and* Carrie).

Tom, was there anything that felt intimidating for you in taking this on? It's your first live-action film role outside of the MCU since 2017.

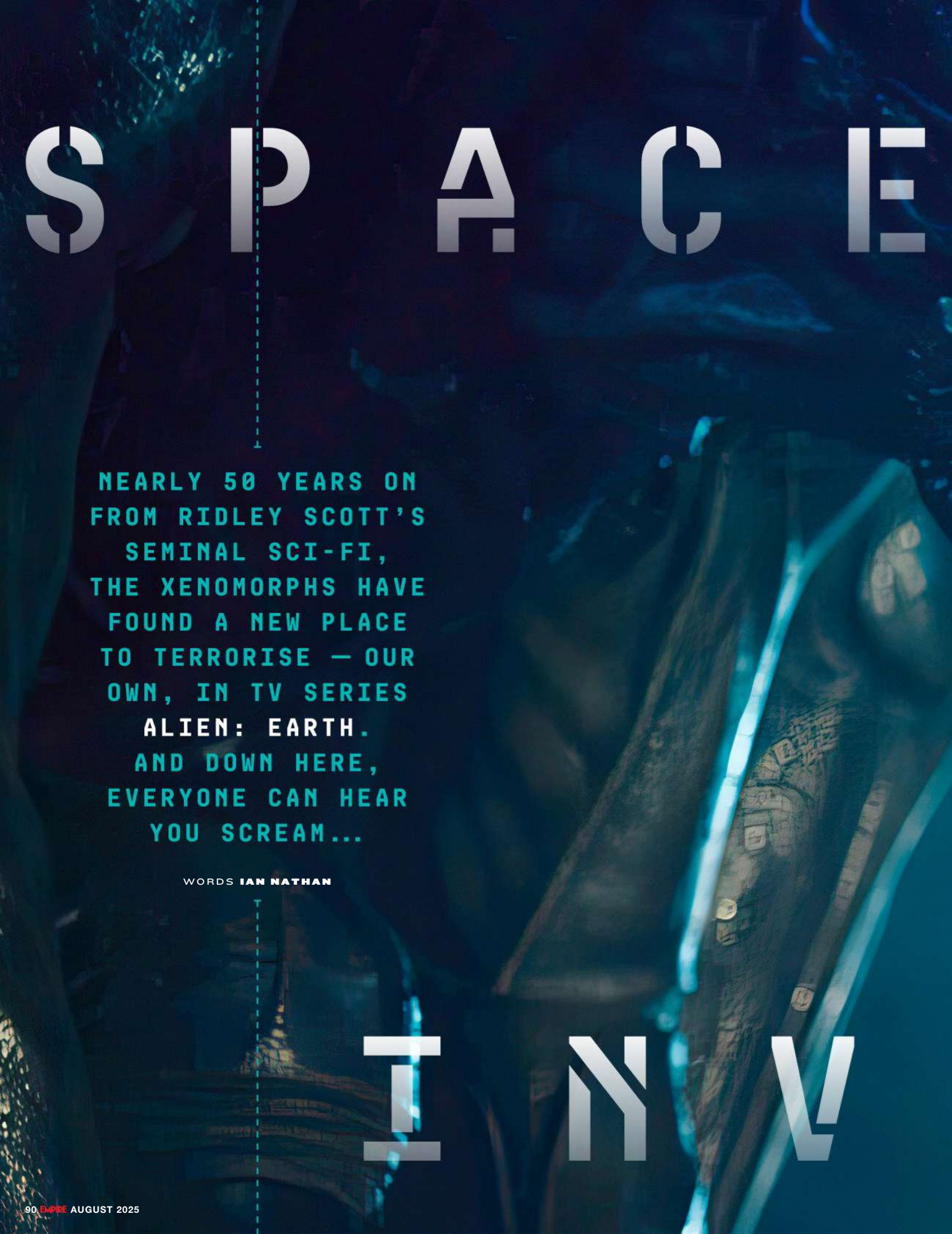
Hiddleston: You know, with everything I've done, I've always chosen the work because it resonates with me. That includes *Loki* and that includes *Chuck*. I actually think there are quite a few parallels between *The Life Of Chuck* and Season 2 of *Loki* especially, strangely enough — they're both about trying to protect and savour the business of living. So there was no vulnerability in that sense, switching from one to the other. What *was* vulnerable was... I did five days of filming on *The Life Of Chuck*. The first four, I was at a mall in Fairhope, Alabama, dancing away and enjoying every second. On the fifth day, I was lying in a hospital bed hooked up to a monitor and hearing my dying heart-rate. Chuck is surrounded by his wife and son. I had three hours in a make-up chair, [making me look] very old and very ill, and I found myself walking to set in a different way. I had spent four days flying — or what felt like flying — and suddenly I felt like an old, infirm man. I spent that day lying in bed, thinking about how I don't know the day and date of the end of my life. None of us do — that's the uncertainty we live with and wake up to, even if we're not entirely cognisant of it, every day. To be playing out the end of a life after four days of vitality felt vulnerable. It was an unusual feeling.

It sounds like making the film had a huge effect on both of you. How do you think *The Life Of Chuck* has changed you?

Flanagan: I think it's the message in King's story. As simple as the message may be, when you distil it all the way down, [appreciating life] is one of the things we are the quickest to forget. All of us forget daily because so many things pull on our attention and pull on our time. It takes effort to remember to stop and to remember to try to find and embrace moments that create joy and create connection. It's going to be something I am trying to remember and hold on to. There's never enough time. And so this film is a critical reminder for me.

Hiddleston: I think life can be very painful. Life is full of loss and grief and struggle. But it's also full of joy and that's what the film is trying to say — that there's joy *everywhere*. There is magic in empathy and the act of compassion. Yes, there are many reasons for anxiety and distress at the moment, that's true, but every day, people are falling in love. People are celebrating birthdays. People are finding meaning and holding on to what's good. And I really do think this film is about that extraordinary spiritual discipline. It takes great courage to hold on to what's good, in a world that feels often as though it's falling apart.

THE LIFE OF CHUCK IS IN CINEMAS FROM 22 AUGUST



SPACE TINY

NEARLY 50 YEARS ON FROM RIDLEY SCOTT'S SEMINAL SCI-FI, THE XENOMORPHS HAVE FOUND A NEW PLACE TO TERRORISE — OUR OWN, IN TV SERIES **ALIEN: EARTH**. AND DOWN HERE, EVERYONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM...

WORDS **IAN NATHAN**

A D E R S

A computerised female voice is broadcasting impending doom. Sirens shriek down long, steam-congested corridors. Smears of emergency red amid oil-rig chic. One of the crew taps on an old-school keyboard surrounded by banks of winking white lights. According to MU/TH/UR, the ship's Cassandra-like mainframe, the prognosis is bleak. Behind the crew member, attempting to smash the door's glass panel, is that legendary Swiss-made biomechanoid hood ornament commonly known as a Xenomorph.

This is the overture to Noah Hawley's *Alien: Earth*, the first television rendition of the unkillable saga. Any sense of *déjà vu* is entirely deliberate.

"I had pinch-me moments, standing on the bridge with the helmets and the bobbing toy," says Babou Ceesay, who plays Morrow, currently at the keys, fixed on surviving the fate of this Nostromo cover-version. Ceesay describes himself as an *Alien* addict.

All of this is merely orientation, a salvo of sense memory. The story begins where a traditional *Alien* movie ends. "The opening few minutes is about trying to create a state of mind," explains Hawley.

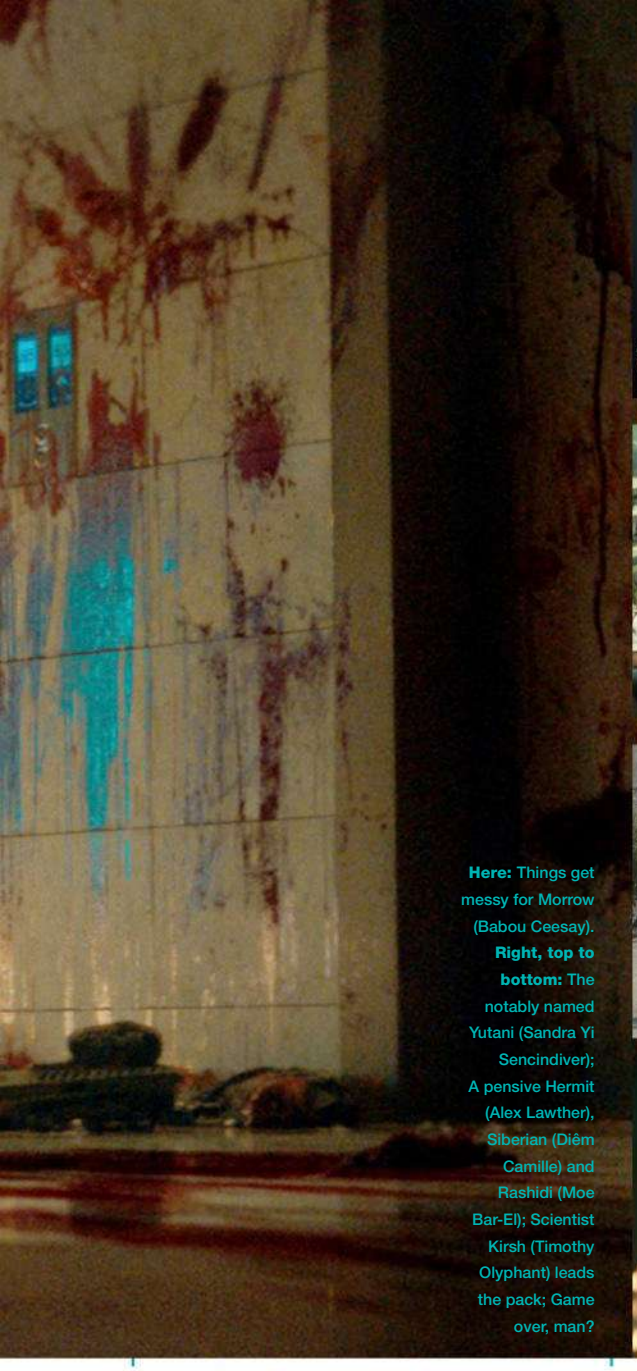
TV is different. Horror is harder to sustain, episode by episode, let alone seven days between each. The survivalist rush of mankind versus Xenomorph is only a fragment of what we can expect. *Alien: Earth* is aiming to be bigger, weirder, and more disturbing. This time it's more.

"I've expanded the definition of what horror is," declares Hawley. "It's not [just] body horror and monster horror, it's that plus moral horror. The things that these characters are asked to do, the impossible choices they have to make."

Gone is the existential isolation of space; impact with Earth is imminent.

NOVELIST, SCREENWRITER, director, showrunner, big-brained New Yorker, and restless geek, Hawley most recently borrowed the parochial-gothic ruse of *Fargo* to produce five wonderful seasons of time-traversing criminal mishap in the key of Coen. He has developed a peculiar gift for harmonising with not only another creator's (or creators') IP, but their actual sensibility. Call it hybrid vigour. So why not the legendary Scott-Giger-Weaver branch-line of sci-fi?

Naturally, the franchise was in his wheelhouse. With Hawley only ten years old when *Alien* tore through the zeitgeist and his parents wisely drawing the line, *Aliens* was the defining



Here: Things get messy for Morrow (Babou Ceesay). **Right, top to bottom:** The notably named Yutani (Sandra Yi Sencindiver); A pensive Hermit (Alex Lawther), Siberian (Diêm Camille) and Rashidi (Moe Bar-El); Scientist Kirsh (Timothy Olyphant) leads the pack; Game over, man?

moment. "I was in high school and, to this day, I still think it's the best action movie ever made," he says, Zooming in from his base in Austin, Texas, shrugging off the effects of a recent chest infection (those damn bugs). "And I was excited to see Fincher's film." Like any fan, he has suffered the highs and lows that have attended subsequent iterations of Xenomorphology. And like any fan, has never lost the sense of potential that hovers over those first two films like laser-fringed mist.

Jump-cut to a TV career that had him in good standing with FX, a TV production arm of Disney. When they asked for a proposal for an *X-Men* show, he conjured up the joyously surreal *Legion*, as out-there yet faithful a Marvel adaptation as we have had. "They've learned that if they ask me if I have an idea, I'm going to have an idea," he smiles.

As early as the wilderness years between the first and second films, a proposal was put forward by ABC to take *Alien* onto the small screen, but that was dismissed in favour of Ripley wrestling with her Freudian foe in the company of robustly cinematic directors. Times have changed. There is arguably no better moment in which to launch a longform *Alien* story. As *Star Wars*-with-moral-accountability drama *Andor* proved, television is a rich avenue for serious science-fiction. Next year will also see a serial iteration of Ridley Scott's other future noir classic in *Blade Runner 2099*.

That said, this subset of biomechanical future-gazing has been worked and overworked like a bad case of acid reflux. Hawley soon found himself flanked by Fede Alvarez's spirited but skittish 2024 feature *Alien: Romulus*. Facehuggers, chestbursters, Xenomorphs, goddamn robots: wasn't it all a bit long-in-the-tooth?

What intrigued Hawley was that compared to, say, *Star Wars,* the *Alien* franchise possessed surprisingly little mythology. What worked, at least at first, was this sense of a thematically rich and malevolent universe. "I wanted to recreate the experience of how I felt when I first saw *Alien* and *Aliens*," he says, "while telling a totally different story."

Time to pay his respects to the Godfather. Albeit on Zoom: Sir Ridley Scott was in his pristinely lit chateau in Provence. "I have yet to shake his hand," says Hawley. Every time they reconvened, he would find Scott sketching *Napoleon* storyboards, an octogenarian of inspiring forward motion. "I wanted to hear whether there was anything left in his brain as far as things he wasn't able to do or would be interested in seeing," says Hawley.

In his inimitable manner, Scott cut to the quick: "Why are we doing this? There has got to be a reason to undertake it." He was as impressed by Hawley's confidence as by his ideas.

IT WAS ALWAYS GOING TO BE Earth. Overlooking the fringe activities of the *AVP* duet (and if you're being picky, the director's cut of *Alien: Resurrection*), somewhere the franchise had never ventured. It was an unwritten law: Ripley shalt never get home. An *Alien* movie is always trapped in a beaten-up spaceship, or a beaten-up colony, or a beaten-up prison. The beauty of the films was in their containment. "If you're looking to do a recurring series, you can't be trapped in a spaceship for 50 hours," asserts Hawley. "And if you can set a show on the planet on which you're filming, it's a lot easier."

It is 2120, two years before the events of *Alien*. On the aforementioned spacecraft, the USCSS Maginot, the crew prepare to return to cryo. As Hawley explains, the Maginot is "a deep-space HMS Beagle". Which means it has specimens, one of which turns out to be a facehugger. Soon enough, a Xeno is prowling the pipe-clad corridors of a thousand nightmares.

Staying faithful to the Nostromo's retro-futuristic aesthetic presented a challenge. The clanking chains, rusted hulls and acid burns of the *Alien* rubric made sense in the belly of a spaceship, but what of the great outdoors? Hawley reimagined a world divided along company lines. "It had only ever been a Weyland-Yutani universe, right? I get to talk about the geopolitical infrastructure of Earth."

Shooting on location in Bangkok, this is an overheating future governed by five corporations: Prodigy, Lynch, Dynamic, Threshold and good old Weyland-Yutani, each with their own aesthetic. For Season 1, the focus is on Prodigy, headquartered on a jungle-choked island, beneath the youthful aegis of Boy Kavalier (Samuel Blenkin). Any resemblance to tech bros of the dystopian present is entirely coincidental.

Meanwhile, the Maginot crash-lands in Prodigy City, drawing the interest of rival factions and bringing a whole new meaning to the term xenophobic. "An *Alien* movie is a two-hour survival story at the end of which, if you're lucky, one person survives," notes Hawley, who describes himself as, for better or worse, an ensemble storyteller. "A television show can't be that. It has to be multiple characters with conflicts and dynamics that play out over multiple seasons."

During the conceptual process, Hawley applied a thought experiment to his scripts: "What's the show without the monster?"

"And if he didn't have a show without the monster, he didn't have anything," says ›

Timothy Olyphant, who plays unnaturally poised Prodigy scientist Kirsh. "I remember realising, 'Oh, the monster's really secondary to all these characters.' That's what is making you lean in."

Across eight episodes, the first season will ponder consumerism, Darwinism and human consciousness. What you won't see is black goo. "Well, look, that first movie came out in 1979 and *Prometheus* came out in 2012," implores Hawley, recalling Scott's hotly debated swerve of a foundation myth. "So you're talking about close to 40 years in which there was no black goo, no David, no Engineers. *Alien,* for me, is baked in as these creatures that have existed for millions of years. They're the perfectly evolved species."

Hawley accepts that Scott, as de facto creator of the franchise, had every right to experiment with his what-if scenario. But when it comes to the show, he'd prefer "to keep the lid on that can of worms". Does that mean this is an alternative *Alien* universe? Hawley hesitates. He's been working with composer Jeff Russo, veteran of the *Star Trek* TV shows, and as Russo told him, "Nobody hates *Star Trek* more than a *Star Trek* fan."

In other words, you're never going to make everyone happy. "What you have to do is tell these stories from an organically fan-place within yourself," offers Hawley. And that doesn't rule out the Nostromo being out there with Warrant Officer Ripley on board.

Which brings us to Wendy.

PLAYED BY SYDNEY Chandler, the 29-year-old, Austin-based actor who portrayed Chrissie Hynde in Danny Boyle's series *Pistol*, Wendy is essentially *Alien: Earth's* protagonist. Tough, courageous, natural leader, short brunette hair: she fits the bill. But in keeping with the show's *Alien*-on-steroids formula, Wendy is not exactly human. "She is a child's mind placed into a synthetic body. So she is a kid-immortal," explains Chandler like a proud parent. The official designation is 'hybrid'.

Only a child's consciousness can be transferred with cutting-edge technology (Wendy's the first); an adult mind is too fixed. As well as chest-bursting space invaders, Hawley has written a "trans-human story about the future of the species". One of the show's thrilling swings is to expand the concept of artificial life in three directions.

In the original *Alien*, recalls Hawley, there's a point when "you realise that that Ripley is trapped between this primordial, parasitic past and the AI future, and they're both trying to kill her". That gave him a thematic framework. "Are we replacing ourselves piece by piece? Are we replacing ourselves entirely with AI? Or are we going to try to become technology ourselves?" Any echo of contemporary fears over the escalation of AI can be labelled subtext.

Chandler, a devotee of yoga, spent weeks studying the youngsters who attended the same classes as her in Austin, impressed that they never second-guessed themselves. "Wendy's mind is like a trap, and she's entering a new body, a new landscape, and seeing who she can trust, who she can't trust, and really focused on finding her brother," she says.

Left: Sydney Chandler as hybrid Wendy. **Right, top to bottom:** Arthur (David Rysdahl) and Dame Silvia (Essie Davis) get close; Light years from Vyvyan — Adrian Edmondson as Atom Eins; Kirsh plus creature; Boy Kavalier (Samuel Blenkin) keeps it chill.

With a nod toward the existential knots of *Blade Runner*, the question of memory becomes crucial. And if memories of Ripley are triggered, that's no bad thing. "I do believe that the franchise is female, the same way that I think of *Fargo* as a female franchise because of Frances McDormand," confirms Hawley. "In a way, I'm combining Newt and Ripley."

"Wendy is a fully-formed, female powerhouse," declares Chandler. "There is no piece in the script where it says one tear falls from her eye."

The name Wendy is significant. Hawley has implanted a *Peter Pan* riff within his hi-tech story (literary spotters will be pleased to note that J.M. Barrie's original play debuted in 1904, the year that Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* was published), and Wendy will become a den mother to a gang of hybrids known as the Lost Boys. "Some of it has to do with the fact that an *Alien* movie is about, basically, 'Will one human survive?' But this show is about, 'Will humanity survive?' And who's more human than a child?" says Hawley.

Trailing the legacy of two smash-hit shows in *Deadwood* and *Justified,* Olyphant was enticed to *Alien: Earth* by the promise of working with Hawley and the chance to bring a character to artificial life. Kirsh is your common-or-garden synthetic, those unnerving AI double-bluffs known to all as Ash, Andy, Bishop, Call, David and Walter. "Don't overthink it," the actor explains. "You know, if you're watching Ian Holm's performance in the first movie, there's no indication he's playing a synthetic character, because they're hiding the ball, right? And then when you watch it a second time, you see the whole thing. To some degree, my job was to try to find that... uncertainty."

Kirsh has a crown of peroxide-blond locks, Olyphant's "little ode to Rutger Hauer from that other Ridley Scott franchise". He also has a more elevated status, being chief scientist at Prodigy, who has developed the hybrid technology alongside Essie Davis as the human Dame Silvia. Within the Neverland of Prodigy's island research facility, Wendy has a human mother and an AI father.

"There's that push-pull," hints Hawley. "Is Wendy going to choose human or other?"

The third variant of artificial life is cyborgs: humans with mechanical upgrades, kind of hardcore Inspector Gadgets. We have already met one. It turns out that Morrow, in the heart of the crashing ship, has useful attributes for a crisis. "He's got this arm, he's got a few things internally," explains Ceesay. "There will be an element of the audience not being sure of him, because Morrow, deep down, wishes he was all machine. Yet he is not immune to his emotions."

In a Hawley script, a single line can hint at a cosmos of backstory, and Morrow remains a beautiful enigma. "You know, he's spent 65 years in space," says Ceesay. "The Xenomorph is the number-one antagonist and Morrow is in that realm. You might say he was the bad guy."

Growing up in Africa, Ceesay caught every single *Alien, Predator*, you name it, on VHS tapes his parents had recorded in Britain. Entering this world, so familiar to him, has felt like a miracle. "You have this seven-, eight-foot-tall thing with massive teeth standing in front of you," he laughs, recalling a first, very practical encounter with the iconic pest. "Your humanity kicks in. I know there's a person in there, but something in my reptilian brain is going, 'This isn't cool. You need to run.'"

XENO FATIGUE, THOUGH, was a potential pitfall. As Hawley posits, after James Cameron answered the question of where the eggs came from, there was little left to reveal. A dilemma that has sent the franchise in all sorts of wonky directions (Newborn, Neomorph, the extracurricular Predalien).

Here's the twist. Knowing he could never hope to regain the shock of discovery that came with the early films, Hawley has the containment vessels of the Maginot play host to five distinct species. In other words, it is definitely going to be a bug hunt. "If I introduce these other creatures and we don't know how they breed," he says, "or what they eat, or any of it, then I can make you feel that core revulsion again. Then the onus comes off the Xenomorph to carry the whole story."

The make-up of the new menagerie will emerge over the season. Suffice to say that the first episode reveals some variation in scale and a profusion of eyes. Hawley settles into a you-don't-know-the-half-of-it grin.

There is talk of a planned five seasons of *Alien: Earth*. Hawley simply classifies it as a "recurring series". But fear not — he does have an ending. "I don't have it mapped out in any linear way, but I do have the larger arc of it," he confirms. "If you don't know how it ends, how can you know what it means?"

In any case, all of this is what makes Hawley such an exciting choice to breed new life on old decks. It is *Alien* — but not as we know it. The hunt is on.

ALIEN: EARTH **IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 13 AUGUST**

final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

AUGUST 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

Scaling new heights

WRITER-DIRECTOR **JESSE ARMSTRONG** ON FOLLOWING UP *SUCCESSION* WITH NEW MOVIE *MOUNTAINHEAD*

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

IT'S LATE MAY, and *Empire* is talking to Jesse Armstrong in a lavishly furnished eyesore of a London hotel room, about his new movie, *Mountainhead*, his first piece of work since the hugely successful, Emmy-hoovering *Succession* came to an end. *Mountainhead*, in which four billionaires get together at a mountain retreat, is just as wildly ambitious as *Succession*, at least from a logistical viewpoint, what with Armstrong writing, shooting and editing it in a matter of weeks. Armstrong is describing the early days, when he didn't have a script, cast or location, when he notes, "It was a shit show..." And if you're looking for a way to measure the impact of Jesse Armstrong as a writer, it comes in the fact that it takes every fibre of willpower *Empire* has to not reply with the words, "... at the fuck factory?"

Because, whether it's as a solo writer or with the likes of Sam Bain and Armando Iannucci, Armstrong has written some of the greatest pieces of dialogue of the last 20 years. "Shitshow at the fuck factory" from *Succession*; "This crack is a bit moreish" from *Peep Show*; numerous Malcolm Tuckerisms from *The Thick Of It* and *In The Loop*. Armstrong's dabs are all over them, adroitly juggling memorable characters, sharp observation and gloriously creative swearing. *Mountainhead* delivers more lines along those lines, as we explored during our conversation.

If anyone was in any doubt after *Succession* about how you felt about billionaires, this movie clears that up.

I don't know. I hope it's not just a hit job on another gang of billionaires. Maybe people will feel it is. I think I'm interested in their power, not their money. And I also think some of the stuff some of those tech people have done is unbelievable, and they're talented. But yeah, I'm scared. And people lash out when they're scared, don't they?

How do you write billionaire-speak? "Busting a B-nut", or deciding that 68.5 degrees is a "solid temp". Are those things you've heard billionaires say?

No, they're almost all extrapolations. But that was one of the things that made me make it. I kind of didn't want to make it, in a sense. I wasn't looking to make it. I wasn't looking to 'what was my next thing' in a very conscious way. But the voices and vocabulary of the tech people got into my head, from books, from magazine articles, from podcasts, and it was sort of to drive them out of my head that I wrote them down.

Clockwise from main: Jesse Armstrong (second right) with Ramy Youssef, Jason Schwartzman and Steve Carell on set of *Mountainhead*; Risk-y business for the tech bros; Brian Cox, Kieran Culkin and Alexander Skarsgård in *Succession*.

So you didn't want to make it?
A true part of the origin story is me writing a review of the [crypto fraudster] Sam Bankman-Fried book, by Michael Lewis [*Going Infinite*], and I did start reading more and more tech stuff. I'd read a bunch for *Succession* and the Matsson character, the Alexander Skarsgård character who was a tech guy. [Fellow writers] Jon Brown and Tony Roche put me onto a bunch of podcasts they'd been listening to. And hearing those voices got in my head and made it seem like, "I've got these other things I'd sort of like to make," but it was almost like an intrusive thought. These people are doing this stuff, and I wanted to write them. It seemed funny and it seemed scary, and a way to put a bunch ›

of anxieties and a bunch of jokes into it. And I was thinking, on the way here, how incredibly fortunate it is to be in the position to talk directly to somebody at HBO, Casey [Bloys, Chairman and CEO, HBO and Max Content], and that he would have the power to say yes, and that it could happen that quickly. When you've been a writer for a long time, which I have, it's just really fucking lucky and nice and rare to be able to have a route that directly to a show on TV. But also, this is a movie, [and] he was receptive to the shape of a movie.

That direct route to HBO comes as a result of the success of *Succession*. Since it blew up, have you heard the word "no" a lot?
Good question. I haven't been pitching things much since, but it's true, it's changed the temperature of the room that you go into.

It's a solid temp.
It's a very solid temp. It's possibly pushing beyond 68.5. And this will be sort of a somewhat annoying thing to read, if you're one of the many writers who finds it hard to get things away, which almost all writers do, but there was a little bit of me that feared that easy "yes", because it might be easier to fall on your face. People say yes to things which, if it's a marginal decision, they're like, "Oh well, he'll moan, he might go and talk to the man from *Empire* and tell him, 'They won't do my stuff!' So we'd better." But there's a margin of grey area where they'll probably go, "Oh, fuck it. Go on, have a go." It's a very fortunate position and I'm glad I'm in it. But there's a little bit of fear about, "Oh God, they're going to just wave through my jazz-funk vanity project." You know — the 'interesting second album'.

But after *Succession* ended, I imagine every studio and network in Hollywood was lining up to bust a B-nut into whatever you wanted to do next. And that might bring with it a paralysis of choice.
I wasn't overwhelmed with meetings and stuff. I'm on an overall deal at HBO, which means I couldn't do anything elsewhere. Theoretically, I felt worried about what I would do next, but I think I had a relatively sanguine, "Oh well, these are my little clutch of pathetic ideas, let's grind away, see what happens." I did know that I wanted to try and direct something before I die. So I probably was going to direct the next thing. And I'm rather pleased that it turned out to be this, because it's got its antecedents in British plays on TV. I tried to shoot it with some visual ambition, but it was a much more comfortable process than it could have been shooting something else. It felt right to use a *Succession* vocabulary — to use two cameras and two camera operators I knew really well. Covering it that way felt right to me.

Was that a worry, staying within, well, not the world of *Succession* as it's not a crossover, but the milieu.
No, not really. I thought people might go, "This is a bit like that, isn't it?" That's sort of fine. It'll be an advantage to some people. "Oh good, it's some sort of Jesse Armstrong product in a similar-shaped package." Other people might feel like, "We've had enough of these fucking jerks. No more of your jerks, thank you." That goes with the territory. I put away that anxiety because this is what I want to write about. I guess I can't stop the way I write, but the essence of the people is really rather different, apart from Logan Roy. These are people who, with the possible exception of Jason Schwartzman's character — who, by the way, has half a billion in the bank — are people who've done it. There's no schmuck. The tragedy of those kids in *Succession* was that they'd never really done it, and their dad could never look past that.

You've written this on your own, and a number of *Succession* episodes too. But you also play well with others. Is that something you've always had an ability to do?
I think I'm a natural collaborator. As a writer, I've always loved and needed the space to be on my own and write. And I love crafting a scene, changing it, making it feel just right. But I love, before that process, talking ideas through. I like an early reader to reassure me. And a collaborator is the best one, because they're inside the thing and they know it. As long as there are no sort of ego anxieties, and the relationship is clean and mutually respectful.

"I'm scared. And people lash out when they're scared."

Main: The iconic 'Connor's Wedding' *Succession* episode. **Top right:** Tears for Logan Roy. **Above:** Director and star making *Mountainhead*. **Left:** *Peep Show*.

Does the way you work change with Sam Bain, or Armando Iannucci?
Oh yeah. With Sam, it's 50/50 in terms of control. The key thing was, if there's a disagreement, who's going to prevail? It was a sort of ugly democracy between Sam and I. There was no lever either of us had to pull to say, "Okay, any discussion is going to go my way." It had to be decided. Sometimes we'd take it to the readthrough. We'll try it your way, and try it my way. Arm [Iannucci] was the boss, and I was a writer on set. He was in control of the show. When I wrote a draft, he'd give it to Tony [Roche], Tony would do a draft, someone would take a look at it, it became a mélange of different writers. But I know from that what it feels like to be a writer who's not in control of the final product. And it can feel great if the show's good and the vibe is good. On *Succession*, a lot of people in those rooms have written unbelievably brilliant work, and I'm very respectful of them, but if there was a decision to be made, I made the final decision. I'm comfortable with that role, but I like it as part of a collaboration.

On *Succession*, how did you know which episodes you wanted to write?
Probably quite early on, it started to form who might write what episodes when we were in the room, as we broke down the season, especially for the last two seasons. The first season, I had pretty much no idea what was going to happen in the show. I didn't know what the show was. I knew what the first episode was. I knew what the tone was — well, even the tone was quite up for grabs in some ways. By the third and fourth seasons, by the time we went into the room, I had a pretty good pitch of what the shape of the season would be. But I probably knew which episodes I would be good at doing.

You obviously wrote the finale. But you also wrote 'Connor's Wedding'. Why did you want to do that?
The one where Logan dies? I just thought it was pivotal. It's imminent in the title of the show. You've been waiting for it all the time, right? So it's a big episode and I felt I could write it. Sometimes you just know.

When it came to the finale, you'd already stuck the landing, so to speak, on *Peep Show* and *Fresh Meat*. So there was no pressure whatsoever on the final episode of *Succession*.
(*Laughs*) I was very anxious about the end, because I know how the end of a thing can flavour your feelings. So I was anxious and I sometimes went a little bit into a not-great period of time, sometimes, writing that show, when the anxiety of getting it right was high. I remember not keeping myself brilliantly together, thinking, "How does this all end?" It was a lot of pressure. And it sounds silly now. It's just a TV show, and it was probably always going to be fine with those actors, and we basically had the shape of it out of the room. But executing it in a way that I really wanted to became an unhealthy obsession for a little while when I was writing it.

Were you happy with it in the end?
Very much so. It was pretty much getting the first really solid draft. And as soon as I had that, I felt comfortable. And then it's all gravy, as they say. We'd always do a read-through on that show as well, and once you heard the read-through working, it's another level of relief. It's funny, people would say to me, when I was writing the script, "Don't worry, it's going to be fine." And I'm like, "That's fucking fine for you to say, isn't it? I know what I've got in my hotel room — jack shit! It's not going to be fine!" The possibility of it being completely terrible felt very close to me.

Was it even remotely comparable to writing the final episode of *Peep Show*?
It was. It was big pressure. We wanted to get it right. It was the last step. We wanted to honour the characters for David [Mitchell] and Robert [Webb] and the relationship between them. In some ways, I still think a sitcom, formally, is the hardest thing to write in terms of film and TV. You've got quite a small canvas to sketch on.

Sometimes, I wonder what Mark and Jeremy would have made of *Succession*.
(*Laughs*) That's something I've never thought. I'd like Sam to write me that scene.

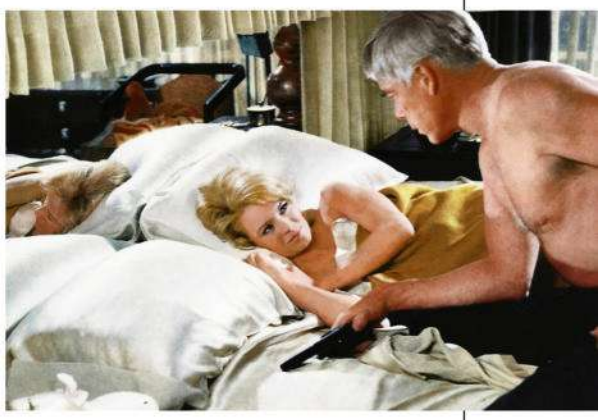
***MOUNTAINHEAD* IS OUT NOW ON SKY AND NOW**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Point Blank

JOHN BOORMAN AND LEE MARVIN'S HUGELY INFLUENTIAL NOIR THRILLER

WORDS **PRISCILLA PAGE**



Clockwise from main: Car trouble for dealer Stegman (Michael Strong) and Walker (Lee Marvin); Dangerous liaison: Walker and sister-in-law Chris (Angie Dickinson); Walker versus goon; Keeping a close eye.

"DID IT HAPPEN? A dream. A dream."

The premise of *Point Blank* is a familiar one: a double-cross, the basis for countless noir films. A criminal named Walker (Lee Marvin) is betrayed by his wife (Sharon Acker) and friend (John Vernon) after a score, and he wants his share. The source material, 1963 pulp novel *The Hunter* by Richard Stark (the pen name of Donald E. Westlake), was seminal but straightforward; John Boorman's film adaptation, though, would adopt a nonlinear structure and become otherworldly, singular.

Lee Marvin agreed to do the 1967 picture with Boorman on one condition: that the original script be rewritten. In a now legendary gesture, he tossed the screenplay out the window. After Alexander Jacobs helped Boorman pen a less conventional draft, Marvin recognised the challenges the director would face in getting it through the system and called a meeting with his agent, the producers, and MGM's head. When it was confirmed he had script and cast approval, he announced, "I defer those approvals to John."

The studio wanted to film in San Francisco, but the city's pastels and gentle hills disgusted Boorman. The cold bleakness of Los Angeles called to him instead — the studio agreed when they realised it would save a heap of money — and cinematographer Philip H. Lathrop rendered the city uncanny, a place as fractured as its timeline. Though *Point Blank* is about betrayal, the behind-the-scenes story was one defined by loyalty, and Marvin proved to be an invaluable ally. At one point, when Boorman was exhausted and frozen with anxiety on set, Marvin faked being drunk to buy him more time. And despite having dialogue written for his one scene with Walker's wife Lynne, Marvin chose to stay silent as she answers his unasked questions, and to exaggerate his gun's recoil when he fires into her bed, a visual metaphor for his revenge quest quite literally backfiring.

What resulted from Boorman's and Marvin's partnership is an impressionistic fever dream, an avant-garde crime-thriller, a surrealist noir. Though previous decades had been lousy with noir and the '70s would resurrect the genre with neo-noir films like *Chinatown* and *Klute*, the '60s had been a barren era. *Point Blank* is something new, an interstitial, revisionist noir: on one level it feels as if it's about the monochromatic ghost of film noir awakening into a Technicolor hallucination. Though Boorman would have preferred to shoot in black and white, he maximised the film's palette. Clad in shades of gold, Angie Dickinson's Chris brings warmth to Walker's world, and to Walker himself. (Though, to Dickinson's dismay, Boorman insisted her hair match the colour scheme of her outfits.) As Walker 'warms up', *Point Blank* veers from industrial blues and greys and harsh metallics into sunbaked yellows and infernal reds, as if Walker is descending into hell.

When the film begins, the traitorous Mal (Vernon) shoots a dark-haired Walker in an abandoned Alcatraz. Walker somehow survives his wounds and the water's treacherous currents only to appear unharmed on a boat, his hair now spectral silver, a guide explaining the impossibility of escape from the island. This dreamlike feeling only intensifies as the story progresses. Studio execs were perplexed. Boorman tried to explain to confounded head Bob O'Brien: "When he's shot, think of it as though everything that follows is what he imagines in the moment of dying: his unlived life flashes before his eyes." Even when the film was finished, MGM discussed reshoots and changes. According to the director, it was the esteemed Margaret Booth who saved the picture.

Criterion Collection, Imago, Warner Bros.

Then working as MGM's supervising editor, and known to be as fierce as she was traditional, Booth told the bigwigs after a screening, "You change one frame of this movie over my dead body."

Through his physically expressive performance, Marvin crafts a character who is both implacable phantom and immovable sculpture, as ephemeral as he is eternal, and wholly mythic. In a scene where he strides through an airport, his shoes clack like gunfire. It's like hearing the final beats of Walker's heart, or what Boorman called "the rhythm of the reaper". Walker's a demon meting out retribution, aided by Keenan Wynn's mysterious Yost, envisioned by Boorman as an Arthurian figure not unlike the mysterious Lady Of The Lake. And despite being a formidable force, Walker kills no-one — people just happen to die in his presence.

The character in the source novel was a man of action, and so is Boorman's Walker, but for all his tenacity, his search is Sisyphean. He's one man against the Organization, an invulnerable criminal outfit that wants to crush him. One of their offices showcases a golden tree on the wall with branches labelled "Chicago", "Denver", "San Francisco". But the Organization is more like a hydra with countless heads that endlessly regenerate. Walker has lost in the most conclusive way possible, yet his dying mind invents a reality in which he prevails. Only Yost truly triumphs: he's revealed to be the only surviving head of the Organization, which means he's used Walker to facilitate a kind of boardroom coup. But Walker finds release, some kind of peace, and dissolves into shadows in the film's final moments.

Informed by Boorman's work as a documentarian, *Point Blank*'s most hopeful interpretation is also its most poignant: the director felt that the film was about Lee Marvin himself. The actor had gone to war as a 17-year-old boy only to be brutalised and wounded, to witness the deaths of nearly his entire platoon, to return home with survivor's guilt and trauma. Like Walker, he returned from the dead hoping to claw back his lost humanity. Maybe Walker realises his quest has been futile — but maybe in relinquishing the money, he finally reclaims this humanity.

Predictably, the French loved the film, and it did well in America, though it wasn't exactly a huge hit. Critics were split, but many recognised *Point Blank* as truly groundbreaking. Its regard and influence have only grown since its release, its DNA unmistakable in modern cinema from *The Limey* to *John Wick*. But it also forever altered the men who joined forces to make it, and Lee Marvin and John Boorman would remain friends long after the film had wrapped. When Marvin passed away, his widow Pam encouraged the director to take a memento: Boorman chose Walker's thundering brogues.

***POINT BLANK* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 A HARD DAY'S NIGHT

(OUT 7 JULY, 4K BR)

As Sam Mendes beavers away on his hopefully fab four films about the Fab Four, here's a lovely reminder of why people are still talking about The Beatles 60 years on. Richard Lester's snapshot of John, Paul, George and Ringo at the height of their powers is as fun, cheeky and vibrant as ever. The songs are pretty good too.

2 THE MONKEY

(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/4K/DIGITAL)

Osgood Perkins' follow-up to *Longlegs* is a twisted take on a Stephen King short story about a toy monkey that serves as a dark harbinger of death, and is virtually a complete 180, tonally, from *Longlegs*' suffocating, doom-laden atmosphere. This one is a live-action Looney-Tune, in which a series of grotesque characters are offed in increasingly outlandish ways, and it's an absolute hoot. Death becomes him.

3 SORCERER

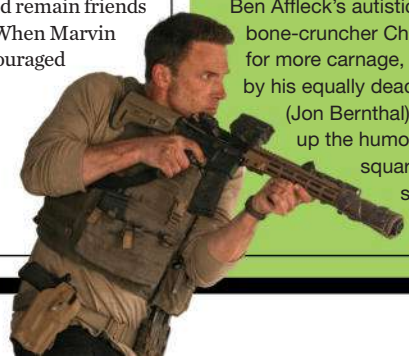
(OUT 28 JULY, 4K BR)

One of the few remakes that actually stands a chance in the 'is it better than the original?' conversation, which is particularly impressive when you consider that the original in this case is *The Wages Of Fear*. William Friedkin, with the confidence of a man who had just directed *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*, transplants this tale of truck-drivers transporting nitroglycerin to the South American jungle and turns it into nightmare fuel.

4 THE ACCOUNTANT 2

(OUT NOW, PRIME VIDEO)

Gavin O'Connor's belated sequel sees Ben Affleck's autistic number-and-bone-cruncher Christian Wolff return for more carnage, accompanied by his equally deadly brother Braxton (Jon Bernthal). O'Connor dials up the humour (Affleck goes squaredancing!) and, somehow, doesn't depreciate his assets.



Time Capsule

Mark Frost

THE CO-CREATOR OF *TWIN PEAKS* ON THE SHOW'S KEY MOMENTS

WORDS **MIKE MUNCER**

TWIN PEAKS CHANGED television forever with its surreal mix of procedural mystery, soap opera and arthouse horror. Much of the credit for that unique blend has gone over the years to the late, legendary David Lynch, but *Twin Peaks* was the creation of two men: Lynch and seasoned TV writer Mark Frost. The duo were a match made in prestige-TV heaven, Frost grounding the show's central 'who killed Laura Palmer?' mystery while always giving Lynch room to go full Lynch. As Frost puts it, "I'm the Paul McCartney to David's John Lennon!" With all episodes dropping on MUBI this month, Frost reflects back on some of the moments that helped *Twin Peaks* peak.

MAN IN THE MIRROR
TWIN PEAKS: SEASON 2, EPISODE 22 1991

"This is the last image of Season 2, which we hoped was going to set up Season 3, exploring what would happen if Bob possessed Dale Cooper, but that was slightly delayed by 25 years! During Season 2 the network had given us short shrift and moved us to Saturday nights, which was a dead zone for quality television at that time. David directed this final episode with everything he had in him. Frank Silva [Bob] was the sweetest, kindest person and it was hilarious to us that he became the stuff of people's nightmares as Bob."

RIP, LAURA PALMER
TWIN PEAKS: SEASON 1, PILOT 1990

"There she is! When we conceived of Laura Palmer being the catalyst that would launch us into *Twin Peaks*, we came up with this idea of her dead body pristinely wrapped in plastic. This was shot on our first day of production on Bainbridge Island in Washington. Sheryl Lee was such a sport because it was chilly that morning and she just had to lie there. This image became so iconic and David paid such attention to all the details, it created a haunting central image for the entire show."

MOOR DER EHT
TWIN PEAKS: SEASON 1, EPISODE 2 1990

"The famous Red Room! This is a funny story. We had a contractual obligation when shooting the two-hour pilot that, should the pilot not be picked up, we'd give it a closed ending to release it as a feature in Europe. That's when we came up with the Red Room. It was shot in a tiny little cramped garage-space long after the pilot was wrapped. We were then able to fold it into the show itself as a dream sequence in Episode 2, which opened us up to a whole other reality."

Alamy, Getty Images, Photofest

LAURA'S FUNERAL
TWIN PEAKS: SEASON 1, EPISODE 3 1990

"This was Episode 3. We shot it in a beautiful little cemetery in, I believe, San Marino, California. We gathered just about everybody in the cast for this moment, which was the first time we had everybody on the set at the same time. Tina Rathborne directed and did a brilliant job. There are so many points of view when you have 30 characters on screen. We wanted a chain reaction of looks between all of the characters but the logistics of working this out was tricky because of the rules of cinema and not crossing the centre line. That's a little 'inside baseball', but that's what I remember most about that day."

BOB BLOWS UP
TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN, EPISODE 8 2017

"When charting Season 3 with David, I realised we needed an origin story for Bob. I introduced the notion of the Trinity Test in 1945, which we were able to fold into the existing mythology. I believe this shot is a composite of the actual mushroom cloud, and David pulled back and raised the point of view with digital CGI. This moment became a perfect midpoint for the season, Episode 8 of 18. It seemed to absolutely gobsmack people. The two of us were as proud of that episode as anything we'd ever done."

A KILLER LOOK
TWIN PEAKS: SEASON 2, EPISODE 7 1991

"This was the moment when we revealed who killed Laura Palmer. The brilliant Ray Wise was able to bring both sides of the tormented Leland Palmer to incredible, vivid life. I always thought Ray's performance was criminally overlooked — how often do you see someone plumb the depths and go to the heights, hilarity and horror that Ray was able to? We actually shot three versions of this scene with three different suspects, so Ray himself didn't know he was the killer until he saw the finished cut. Imagine his surprise! That mystery was an industrial secret on the level of the formula for Coca-Cola. Yes, in a way this moment did kill the golden goose, but that also led to Season 3 happening the way it did, so sometimes things happen the way they're supposed to."

FROST/LYNCH
TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN 2016

"This was a wonderful moment. This is actually an office in City Hall in Los Angeles where we shot for a few days for Season 3. It was where we shot the scenes with David as Gordon Cole and David Duchovny as Denise. David was always hilarious [as Gordon]. This image is of the two of us laughing about the scene we were shooting involving a gag called 'the Congressman's dilemma' that David came up with on the spot and had asked me if I liked. We had many great moments like that, but this was one of my favourites."

LAURA'S SCREAM
TWIN PEAKS: THE RETURN, EPISODE 18 2017

"Initially David and I were in two minds about how to end *The Return*. I felt that Cooper going back and rescuing Laura then having the mystery of her death disappear might be an extraordinary way to bring us back to ground zero. But David said, 'He has to pay a price for what he's tried to do.' Sheryl Lee was incredible. This is the moment when the full horror comes back to this poor soul; it's the price Laura Palmer pays for Cooper's attempted good deed. That was the end of this story. We had talked a little bit about where a fourth season might go, but with David having left us, it's hard to imagine doing anything beyond this. It certainly feels like it closed the circle."

ALL EPISODES OF *TWIN PEAKS* ARE AVAILABLE NOW ON MUBI

SPOILER SPECIAL

HAVOC

GARETH EVANS ON THE SHOOTOUTS AND STANDOUTS OF HIS ACTION THRILLER

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

GARETH EVANS' MUCH-DELAYED return to action movies, *HAVOC* (note the all-caps title, a promise to an audience if ever there was one), was worth the wait, with the Welsh director delivering a hard-boiled, neon-drenched thriller that explodes into life (and lots of death) for its last hour. Here, Evans talks with *Empire* about some of the movie's key moments. Some of which don't even involve anyone being shot.

THE SCENE-SETTER

The movie begins in reflective mode, as we meet Tom Hardy's grizzled, guilt-ridden cop, Walker, ruminating on his lot in life in a voice-over that was a very late addition to the movie. "I was torn about it, because we don't use voice-over at any other point in the film," admits Evans. "I understood how it would function in the opening of the film. From the get-go, you have a full understanding of the weight on Tom's shoulders, without knowing how it exactly played out. But I didn't want to have a voice-over to close the film."

(DON'T) MEET VINCENT

The film's original opening sequence becomes its first moment of action, bringing us into the middle of a cops-and-criminals chase through the streets of *HAVOC*'s unspecified American city. It's here where we meet Charlie (Justin Cornwell) and Mia (Quelin Sepulveda), the star-crossed lovers at the heart of the story, but it's only at the end of the chase that we discover the cops chasing them are led by Timothy Olyphant's Vincent. Who, ostensibly, will become the film's chief villain. "It was important to hold back on identifying people within that sequence," explains Evans. "I wanted the audience to feel like that chase has been going on for a while, and we have to keep up and figure out what's going on. It felt like an odd moment to have a close-up of the A-list guy." Olyphant's agent might choose to disagree.

UNDERCOVER KILL

From the film's opening, we know that Walker has done Something Bad. So bad that it's torpedoed his marriage, impacted his career, and destroyed his friendship with Vincent and his fellow cops. In a flashback sequence, we finally find out what that is: Walker, Vincent and pals pulled off a heist during which they killed a guy who turned out to be an undercover cop. Another sequence that was added to the movie during its long production hiatus. "Tom and I started discussing what that traumatic event would be,"

says Evans. "What would shake Walker to his core? Killing another cop, that's the one thing you can't do. That's the thing that eats away at him."

SHACK ATTACK

"Why did we put a harpoon in there?" laughs Evans, of a moment during the movie's climax. It all comes to a head with an astonishing siege sequence, as scores of Triad soldiers descend upon Walker's quiet fishing shack (where we see him in that opening sequence) in an attempt to kill him, Charlie and Mia. They fail miserably, but not before reducing it to its component parts, and not before an incredible fight between Walker and a character known only as the Assassin (Michelle Waterson) that ends with her being harpooned through the face. Ouch. Which rather answers Evans' own question. "Why not have a harpoon in a fishing shack?"

THE SHOWDOWN

Interestingly, Walker is so exhausted after the shack showdown that he passes out for a spell, and so isn't involved in the fraught Mexican stand-off that follows, as Charlie's father, corrupt politician Lawrence Beaumont (Forest Whitaker), finds himself unable to kill Mia, taking a bunch of bullets for her as a result. "I wish I could say there's this amazing, artful reason why," says Evans. "But Walker's so fucking hurt and damaged. It's realistic as hell. And what would he say? What would he add to that conversation?" For Evans, this is the film's emotional apex, as Yeo Yann Yann's vengeful Triad boss, mourning the loss of her own son, finally sees the light. "The heartache of that is not lost on Mother," says Evans. "She needs it [Mia's death] to happen, and when it doesn't, when Lawrence puts the gun down, the lesser version of that character would walk across, grab the gun and go bam. But she's not blind to the human emotion that's at play."

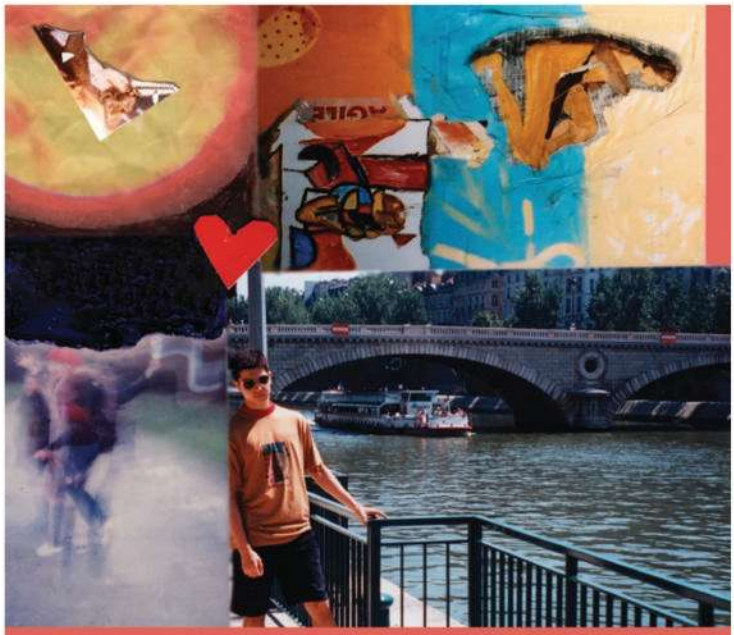
IT ALL KICKS OFF

Not that it does her any good. Because soon after this she's killed. And many other major characters are bumped off too, in quite spectacular fashion, riddled with bullets as *HAVOC* earns the all-caps. "I'm okay with that," admits Evans (see all his previous work for further details). "It's so over-the-top that it becomes absurd. And in a weird way, it becomes funny, in that Peter Jackson approach to violence." One shot, though, of Richard Harrington's corrupt cop Jake getting a shotgun blast right in the face, was almost too much even for Evans. "Everyone gets shot in films, but it's always body hits," he laughs. "You never, ever see any damage to their face. That's the one time I've ever seen something of my own and gone, 'Fucking hell, that's wrong!'"

MERRY CHRISTMAS, WALKER

The movie ends, not with voice-over, but with soaring score and a push into a wounded Walker's eyes as cop cars show up, and he tells partner Ellie (Jessie Mei Li) not to give his daughter the frankly crappy presents he bought her. "Don't want to ruin her Christmas," he says, in the movie's last line. There has been some speculation about Walker's fate, with some suggesting that the close-up of his eyes indicates that he's about to succumb to his wounds. Not so, says Evans. The wounds Walker is about to succumb to are purely moral. "His life is about to change," says the director. "We're seeing the reflection of the police lights in his eyes as they get closer and closer. That's the route for him going forward. He's going to get arrested, he's going to have a lot of questions to answer. We'll see what happens next with him." A hint of a sequel? 'HAVOC 2: HAVOC HARDER', anyone?

***HAVOC* IS ON NETFLIX NOW**



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The Founder of Emo Music

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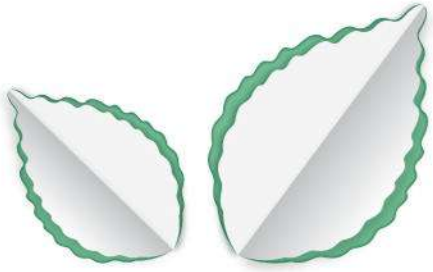
Coco from Fragma makes a guest appearance on Dawns and Space Travel.



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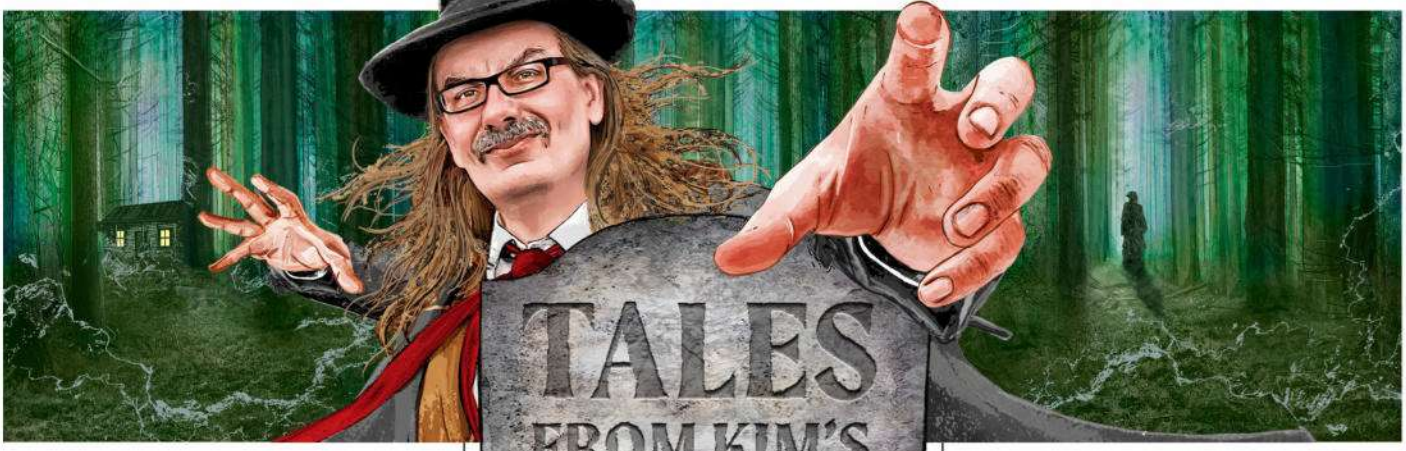

TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

NIGHTSIREN

TEREZA NVOTOVÁ'S *SVETLONOC*, aka *Nightsiren* — out now on Blu-ray from Arrow — is set in contemporary Slovakia, but explores the persistence of horribly convenient (for men) superstitions. In the Carpathians, calling a woman a witch is an infallible excuse to do dreadful things to her. Pretty much everything which goes wrong — especially if it's some idiot bloke's fault — is written off as witchcraft. Šarlota (Natália Germáni), who fled the village as a child, is drawn back by a bogus letter from the mayor, inviting her to claim an inheritance which turns out to be a burned-down cabin. A witch did it, apparently. The locals are unfriendly, except for a few nonconforming women who have somehow survived — notably Mira (Eva Mores), whose skills with herbalism and home-made psychedelics suggest that by some definitions she really is a witch.

A backstory about what made Šarlota run off in the first place involves a breathtaking moment of horror in the first minutes of the film. Her family history takes in an abusive mother (not a witch), a missing sister (taken by a witch) and a kindly herbalist neighbour (a witch). Nvotová starts with a kind of rough-hewn realism, with shell-suited clods in all-terrain vehicles bombing about the landscape, nevertheless upholding ancient traditions. "I hate this custom," complains Mira as a couple of boys, encouraged by adult men, squirt women with super-soakers at Easter — a genuine middle-European practice which UK authorities have issued travel advisories about. What's cringingly horrible about this is that women who don't pretend to think it's fun are scorned as spoilsports. Lashing out at the brats gets Šarlota tagged as a child-beater by men who don't actually think beating wives and children is wrong if they do it. The Easter water tradition — wet women are supposed to give their soakers eggs as a thank you — extends to the familiar treatment of tossing suspected witches in a lake to see if they float.

It's not a film without magic, especially when Mira's drugs kick in. An extraordinary sequence set during a Midsummer Night storm (the film is big on calendar holidays) has Šarlota imagine being drawn into a choreographed, big production-number orgy as entranced and entwined locals seem to grow and shed jewelled snakeskins. It's like extreme *Twilight* fan fiction but also taps into medieval visions of what witches do which is supposed to be so wicked — and exciting. *Nightsiren* has a Lars von Trier vibe going — at a guess, Nvotová's favourite Lars joints are *Antichrist* and *Dogville* — as an admirable but imperfect heroine gets deeper into trouble simply by not accepting the way things are. In the last act, the water-pistol boys go missing in the forest at night and the whole village decides torturing Šarlota and Mira for answers they don't have makes more sense than forming a search party. The film struggles through multiple injustices — especially at the end — but does come up with a possible happy-ever-after... if only through magic.

Top to bottom: Šarlota (Natália Germáni) is beset by horrors in *Svetlonoc/Nightsiren*; A lupine threat.

Arrow Video

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

GATOR CREEK
(DIGITAL)

A drugs bust leads to meth polluting the bayous. Hopped-up alligators give squabbling plane-crash survivors a hard time as they trudge and splash back to civilisation. The Deep South is played by the Philippines and most of the gator-bait mean girls are British. Nonsensical but watchable.

GRIMCUTTY
(DIGITAL)

Teens are terrorised by a bogeyman in writer-director John Ross' internet-meme horror. Clueless parents (Shannyn Sossamon, Usman Ally) make things worse, Ross offering a fresh take on neuroses which give dangerous potency to 'creepypasta' myth figures like Momo and Slenderman.

THE KILLER
(DIGITAL)

John Woo claims back the title from that Fincher/Fassbinder streamer in this redo of his 1989 hit, with Nathalie Emmanuel playing the conscience-struck, now Paris-based assassin. Woo still stages world-beating shoot-outs, while Omar Sy (Good Cop) and and Sam Worthington (Bad Person) offer fun support.

THE MILL KILLERS
(DIGITAL)

A girls' reunion goes bad in this *Sorority Row/Shallow Grave* crossbreed. Four former friends are stalked by a sou'wester slasher in an abandoned Welsh mill while trying to retrieve loot from a long-ago payroll robbery. Writer-director Aled Owen strings out the suspense expertly before bodies start dropping.

TRANSMISSION
(DIGITAL)

Not so much a found-footage film as a channel-surfing movie, Michael Hurst's horror flips through late-night TV broadcasts which turn out to be telling one story. A clever and creepy collage of B-picture pastiche, cosmic horror and multimedia skit pic.

The Ranking

The movies of 1995

FOUR *EMPIRE* WRITERS. ONE GREAT CINEMATIC YEAR. NO COINCIDENCE.

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

Marco Vittur

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
For him, the action is the juice.

HELEN O'HARA
Has never knowingly quoted *Clueless*. As if!

JAMES DYER
The greatest trick the devil ever pulled.

BECKY DARKE
Has a strange crush on Jerry the truck driver from *Die Hard 3*.

Chris: 1995, then. When you look back at the cinema of 1995, do you think, "Good year"?
Helen: Great year. So many films I could have put in my top ten and didn't.
Chris: Same here. *Empire Records*.
James: Don't you knock Rex Manning Day!
Chris: I love *Empire Records*. I'm not just saying it because it has "*Empire*" in the title.
Becky: I was 13. This is a formative year for me. There are films on this list that were in my VHS collection and were on hard rotation.
Chris: Like what?
Becky: Like *While You Were Sleeping*...
Chris: She's gone with the big guns right away. I think it might be my favourite romcom.
Becky: Bill Pullman and Sandra Bullock are perfect.
Chris: That movie is so charming, and she is absolutely delightful in it.
Becky: I was in physical pain putting this list together, and having to bump things off my top ten.
James: It was a very good year. I was at uni. I saw many of these in the cinema, and many on Sky, and many on VHS.
Chris: It's banger after banger after banger.
James: Hold you, thrill you, kiss you, kill you.
Helen: I was so hyped for *Batman Forever* before it came out. And then I saw the film, and it wasn't everything I hoped it would be.
Becky: It's my favourite Batman film.
Chris: Oh my God, Becky's played her joker.
Becky: I knocked off *Casino* to put it on.
Chris: I think we can all agree that *Batman Forever* is a greater cinematic achievement than *Casino*. Ahem. But talking of *Casino*, it was a great year for thrillers. You have *The Usual Suspects*. You have *Seven*. You have *Heat*.
James: And *GoldenEye*. It's one of the best Bond films. We thought Bond was done, and to come back with that dam sequence was amazing.
Chris: When I look at it as a pure action movie, I think *Die Hard With A Vengeance* and *Crimson Tide* knock it into a cocked hat. But as a Brosnan Bond movie, it's without peer.
Helen: It's hard to get past *Heat*, really. I was not impressed by *Heat* at the time, I'm gonna be honest with you.
Chris: You and the Academy. Zero nominations.
Helen: I found it long and blokey, but it's one of those films that has so much to unpack, and I've grown to appreciate it as time has passed. The coffee-shop face-off between Pacino and De Niro was a big thing at the time, but it's not those central performances that I return to. I don't think Val Kilmer ever gave a better performance.
Chris: I do love it because of Pacino and De Niro. The high contrast between their acting styles is glorious.
James: That shootout is one of the all-time greatest shootouts. There's a grandiosity to the way it's pulled off. And that final moment when they're together in death, it just gets you.
Helen: Every time I watch it, I think, "This time, it's gonna be okay."
Chris: There are certain aspects of *The Usual Suspects* that are now problematic. Yes, I'm talking about Stephen Baldwin's podcast.
Becky: I was absolutely obsessed with it at the time.
James: It's my number one. It's a hard film to talk about nowadays, but it's such an incredible script, and it has one of the all-time great twists. I remember coming out of that film, and it felt electrifying.
Becky: And it bears repeat watches, because you see all the little clues it's dropping.
Helen: The script is beautiful. It's a miracle of construction. It's such a stylish movie as well.
Chris: It's very much up there. As is *Seven*.
Helen: Talk about style. I love that it missold itself in the marketing. The trailer sells it as a slightly darker than normal buddy comedy. And then you get hit in the face with a brick of a film. It's genuinely one of the most horrifying films I've ever seen.
Becky: I think it's flawless. Fincher is one of my favourite directors and this is his masterpiece.
Chris: I think the thing that's overlooked about *Seven* is its heart. The end wouldn't work at all if you didn't connect with Freeman and Pitt, and with Gwyneth Paltrow in the brief time we get with her.
James: That ending is brutal.
Chris: Before we introduce joy and levity, let's talk more guys with guns. *Die Hard With A Vengeance*, anyone?

James: Highest-grossing film of 1995.
Helen: It's clever. It messes with the formula and doesn't just do the same thing again. That's the secret sauce. And Sam Jackson really stands out.
James: That buddy aspect brings a whole new dimension. He's an excellent foil for Bruce Willis.
Becky: I had a notebook in my teens, and on one page I had the puzzle from the park with the water. I'd figured it out. I don't know how to do it anymore.
Chris: Is it the best blockbuster of the year?
James: It is. I'd put it and *Crimson Tide* in the same breath. *Die Hard* is a rollicking good time at the movies, whereas *Crimson Tide* is more intense.
Helen: How do we define "blockbusters" in those days? Is *Apollo 13* a blockbuster? It's one of my comfort movies. It's smart people being smart, which is one of my favourite genres.
Becky: Competency porn.
Helen: At its finest.
Chris: *Crimson Tide* is the same thing, right?
Helen: What upsets me is that they can't talk it out. If they talked it out in *Crimson Tide*, I would have more respect for both of them. Would that work as a movie? No.
Chris: We joked about it earlier, but where do we stand on *Casino*, seriously? It's the second-best Sharon Stone movie of the year, obviously, after *The Quick And The Dead*. But it's fucking great.
Helen: I was underwhelmed at that point in my life by *GoodFellas*. And *Casino* felt to me better than *GoodFellas*.
Chris: It's not an opinion I hold myself, but it's a legitimate one.
Helen: It's much more nuanced, and meaty.
Chris: Pesci is evil incarnate in that movie. Alright, we've talked enough about guys with guns. How about pigs with joy?
Helen: I couldn't make it fit into my top ten, but *Babe* is pretty much a perfect film.
James: It just makes me hungry.
Helen: In terms of joy, I watched *Sense And Sensibility* again, and it is phenomenal. It's the Emma Thompson adaptation of Jane Austen, so you have two of the smartest women who ever lived, Ang Lee is exquisite behind the camera, and you have this insane cast. It's so clever. It makes it feel alive. It brings out all the comedy without losing the heart.
James: I cannot make sense of your sensibilities. But of all the Austens of this year, *Clueless* would be my pick.
Becky: It's my number one.
Helen: It's also a genius piece of writing. And if you're talking about great casting, oh my God. Spotting Paul Rudd when he was just 26 was incredible.
Chris: It's been easy to dismiss Alicia Silverstone, but she's amazing in this.
Becky: It's whip-smart, laugh-out-loud funny, and the design is stunning. It ticks all the boxes. I watch it probably once every six months.
Helen: And it's iconic. It had this impact on the culture.
Becky: It literally changed the language we speak. Things like, "as if", "whatever", "like".
James: Can I make a case for the most romantic movie of that year? *Before Sunrise*. I love everything about that film. I love that bit where you see all the places Jesse and Celine went, without them there, and it feels so empty.
Chris: Romantic, yes, but Jim Carrey climbing out of a rhino's bum in *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* is the funniest moment of 1995.
Becky: *Toy Story* is pretty funny.
James: *Toy Story* is not on my list. Not only is it not in the top ten films of this year, it's not in the top ten Pixar films.
Helen: No, it's a great film.
Chris: It's so important as well, in terms of cinema history. There's only one thing to say: James, you are a sad, strange little man, and you have my pity.
James: Look, it pushed the boundaries of what people could do with computers, but I think we can all agree that *The Net* did more for computers than *Toy Story* did in 1995.
Chris: Alright, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?
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THE TOP TEN

1.
HEAT
2.
SEVEN
3.
THE USUAL SUSPECTS
4.
CLUELESS
5.
DIE HARD WITH A VENGEANCE
6.
TOY STORY
7.
BEFORE SUNRISE
8.
CASINO
9.
SENSE AND SENSIBILITY
10.
CRIMSON TIDE

One way out

ANDOR CREATOR TONY GILROY REFLECTS ON THE END OF A TRIUMPHANT JOURNEY

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

FOR THE FIRST time in a long while, Tony Gilroy doesn't have *Andor* on his mind, or in his diary. "I've been really monomaniacally on this five-year calendar," he says, referring to the time he's spent turning *Andor* into one of the great *Star Wars* stories, across two seasons and 24 episodes. And now, it's over. When *Empire* talks to Gilroy over Zoom, it's the morning after the night before, the morning after the final three episodes of *Andor* dropped on Disney+, taking Diego Luna's rebel captain Cassian Andor all the way up to *Rogue One*, the movie where Gilroy first connected with the character, and the beginning of Cassian's end. Endings are very much on Gilroy's mind right now. "There are so many different farewells and endings to the process," he says. "And this is another one, perhaps a more definitive one."

Don't read too much into that. Gilroy isn't hinting that there might be more *Andor* down the line. The story has been told, comprehensively. "We have no more potential," he says. "It's all out there. There's nothing that we know that you don't know."

The evening of the final three-episode drop was a big-screen celebration for Gilroy — Season 2's emotionally potent tenth episode, entitled 'Make It Stop', screened at New York's Paley Center, followed by a Q&A with Stephen Colbert. "He's a huge *Star Wars* nerd," laughs Gilroy of the talk-show host. "But I got him talking about *Lord Of The Rings*, and man, he's all the way in. Let's put it this way — I sent him a thank you note this morning, and I made sure to put it in Elvish."

The second season of *Andor*, with its bold structure (each arc of three episodes is set a year apart), had plenty of highlights. Including that tenth episode, the first *Andor* episode without any actual Andor. It saw the Empire finally catch up with Stellan Skarsgård's charismatic rebel spymaster Luthen Rael while shedding more light on his long relationship with his co-conspirator, Elizabeth Dulau's Kleya, who turns out to be a young refugee girl who effectively becomes Luthen's surrogate daughter. "I knew we were going to do an origin story for Luthen," says Gilroy. "The one thing Stellan said is, 'Whatever it is, it can't be revenge. Don't make it revenge.' I thought that was a really smart instruction note for me."

However, the arguable highlight of the season is the show's unstinting depiction of the Ghorman Massacre in Episodes 8 and 9, when the Empire, having carefully planted seeds for years, butchers hundreds of innocent people in an extended sequence that is the boldest and bravest *Star Wars* set-piece in a long time. "We knew we were going to drop a bomb when Ghorman came," admits Gilroy. "Those two episodes are the flashiest ones." Yet even he wasn't prepared for the reaction. "The Ghorman Massacre hit bigger than we had even anticipated. Our experience is so construction-oriented. You get so lost in the veneer — the studs, and the plumbing, and the electricity of the whole thing — that you're always slightly immune to its true, fresh potency. Watching the response, we were all a little blown back by how potent it was."

Cassian is a witness to the Ghorman Massacre, but for obvious reasons had to survive (not all major characters were so fortunate). His final walk through the Rebel base on Yavin, in the closing moments of the final episode (entitled 'Jedha, Kyber, Erso') sees him share a glance with a Force healer introduced earlier in the season — a Force healer who, it is implied, has seen his impending demise on the beaches of Scarif. For Gilroy, it was the only place in *Andor*'s world where the Force made sense —

"We have no more potential. It's all out there."

Main: Rebel with a cause: Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) is on target. **Above right:** Tragic spymaster Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård). **Right:** Rebel Kleya Marki (Elizabeth Dulau). **Below:** Showrunner Tony Gilroy on set with Luna.

Above, clockwise from top left: Syril Karn (Kyle Soller); Switch it off and on again; Trouble brews; The Ghorman Front gather. **Left:** Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly) with Vel Sartha (Faye Marsay).

and added just the right level of mysticism to Cassian's place in some kind of divine plan. "He's sort of like *Zelig*," he points out, referring to Woody Allen's 1983 satire. "He's everywhere where things are happening. I said, 'I'd rather have him have a reluctant destiny than look like a coincidental pinball machine.'"

There had been a school of thought that *Andor* would end with plenty of blood on the walls. If you didn't show up in *Rogue One*, the theory went, you wouldn't survive past *Andor*. Yet while plenty of major characters did bite the blaster bolt, plenty of Gilroy's creations for the show lived to fight another day. Most of those weren't even thoughts in Gilroy's head when he joined *Rogue One*'s troubled production, but if he were to have another crack at that movie now, he knows who he'd bring into the mix. "I'd want [Faye Marsay's] Vel there for sure," he says, without hesitation. "My God, think of Vel's take on [*Rogue One* protagonist] Jyn Erso! I'm sure she'd have some very choice things to say about her. Jyn would light up all of Vel's irritation."

At the time of speaking, Gilroy had yet to revisit *Rogue One*. "I'll probably watch *Rogue* this weekend, tiptoe through it and just see how it feels," he says. "I've been very leery of doing that — I don't know why, everybody else has done it." Famously a *Star Wars* agnostic when he first came aboard, he's now a convert. "I watched some of *Skeleton Crew*, which I thought was really, really cool," he says. "I like how committed it is to its tone, and it seems really well done." Meanwhile, Beau Willimon — a key member of *Andor*'s writing team — is remaining in that galaxy far, far away on James Mangold's Biblical-epic-inspired *Dawn Of The Jedi*. "They're going way back. That's kind of interesting," Gilroy notes, "because it's free."

Having spent a decade knowing more than *Star Wars* viewers, Gilroy is ready to return to the other side of the screen. "I'll be watching, that's for sure," he says. May the Force be with him.

***ANDOR* IS OUT NOW ON DISNEY+**

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

DENZEL WASHINGTON

1 Which movie is the highest-grossing (at the worldwide box office) of Washington's career?

2 Washington's breakthrough movie saw him star in a Norman Jewison drama, adapted from the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *A Soldier's Play*. What was the name of the film?

3 "A Tough Cop. A Dead Lawyer. Every partnership has its problems" — that's the tagline for which Washington comedy?

4 *Fences*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *The Piano Lesson* (all three of which Washington produced) form part of his commitment to bring which series of plays to the big screen?

5 Washington rose to fame playing Dr Philip Chandler in which classic US hospital drama?

6 He's received ten Oscar nominations in his career, winning twice. For which movies did he prevail, and in which categories?

7 How many BAFTAs has he taken home so far?

8 In which Washington movie does the Rolling Stones song 'Time Is On My Side' play a pivotal part?

9 Washington went toe-to-toe with Gene Hackman in *Crimson Tide*. What's the name of the submarine on which it takes place?

10 "King Kong ain't got shit on me!" Who's the "me" in this famous Washington monologue?

11 He's faced off against Russell Crowe in two movies. No points for Ridley Scott's *American Gangster*. One point for the other, which came out in 1995.

12 What is the book of Eli in *The Book Of Eli*?

13 Ron Hunter, John W. Creasy, Doug Carlin, Walter Garber and Frank Barnes are characters Washington played for which director? An extra point for each film named.

14 *Highest 2 Lowest* will be Washington's first collaboration with Spike Lee since 2006. What was the name of their last movie together?

15 In which Antoine Fuqua movie does he say, "The mistake you made was, you killed my friend. So, I'm going to kill each and every one of you, and the only disappointment in it for me is that I only get to do it once."

16 Washington once played a character called Whip Whitaker. What was Whip's occupation?

17 Bruce Springsteen won an Oscar for Best Original Song for his contribution to which Washington movie?

18 Who's missing from the line-up of the *Magnificent Seven* remake? Denzel Washington, Chris Pratt, Ethan Hawke, XX, Lee Byung-hun, Manuel Garcia-Rulfo, Martin Sensmeier

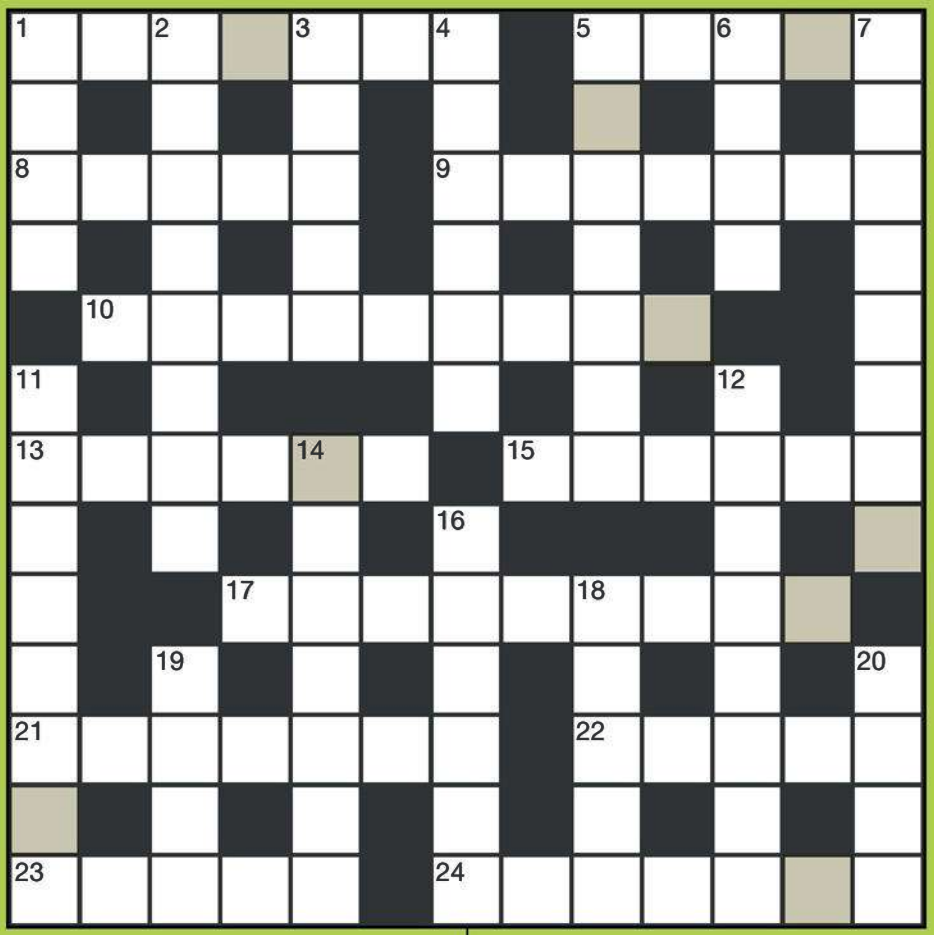
19 Who wrote the novel upon which *Devil In A Blue Dress* was based?

20 Denzel has directed four movies. What was the name of his debut, in 2002?

ANSWERS **1** *Gladiator II* ($462 million) **2** *A Soldier's Story* **3** *Heart Condition* **4** August Wilson's *Century Cycle* **5** *St. Elsewhere* **6** *Glory*, Best Supporting Actor (1990) and *Training Day*, Best Actor (2002) **7** None — he's never been nominated for a BAFTA, the berks **8** *Fallen* **9** The USS Alabama **10** Alonzo Harris, in *Training Day* **11** Virtuosity **12** The Bible (in braille) **13** Tony Scott — *Crimson Tide*, *Man On Fire*, *Déjà Vu*, *The Taking Of Pelham 123*, and *Unstoppable* **14** *Inside Man* **15** *The Equalizer 2* **16** Pilot, in *Flight* **17** *Philadelphia* **18** Vincent D'Onofrio **19** Walter Mosley **20** Antwone Fisher

Imago

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Stanley, filmmaker whose rarely seen first feature was *Fear And Desire* (7)
5 — *Of Glory* (Stanley from **1 Across** movie) (5)
8 Calle, who was Supergirl in *The Flash* (5)
9 French cinema's iconic Catherine (7)
10 Judd Apatow comedy with Katherine Heigl and Seth Rogen (7,2)
13 See **23 Across**
15 Zack, of *Man Of Steel* and *Justice League* (6)
17 His day as the Jackal came before Mr Redmayne's (6,3)
21/18 Down Final fling for Tom Hardy as Venom (3,4,5)
22 Richard Dreyfuss' Roy, who had a close encounter with something very unusual (5)
23/13 Across Yorkshireman who plays Galactus (5,6)
24 Dan, who stars as Trapper in *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* (7)

DOWN

1/14 Down Classic Henry Hathaway film noir with Victor Mature and Richard Widmark (4,2,5)
2 Kim, who's been Vicki Vale and Domino (8)
3 *Dune*'s Oscar, soon to be seen as Guillermo del Toro's Frankenstein (5)
4 Margot, predecessor to Kate Bosworth, Amy Adams and Rachel Brosnahan (6)
5 *The — Lessons* (Steve Coogan film) (7)
6 On film, it could be grit or on TV, blood (4)
7 Role in which you'll see (or won't see) Vanessa Kirby (3,5)
11 The best one won the David Lean Award (8)
12 Keanu was the Devil's (8)
14 See **1 Down**
16 Peter Quill's half-sister (6)
18 See **23 Across**
19 Could be Kristen, could be Jamie (4)
20 It links Laura Mars, Wakanda and the hills (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

LIMITED-EDITION HAMMER SCI-FI

THIS YEAR, ICONIC studio Hammer Films is curating a series of its most beloved classics as part of an ultimate 4K restoration collection — bringing a title to 4K UHD for the first time every month. While famed for horror, Hammer covers genres from comedy to crime, and the latest additions are cult '50s sci-fis *The Quatermass Xperiment* (out now) and *Quatermass 2* (out in July and available for pre-order). Each comes as a limited-edition box set packed with bonus material, and we have one of each for two winners. To enter, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below.

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COMPETITION ENDS 28 JULY

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 28 July. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

JULY'S ANSWERS ACROSS: **1** Hobbs, **4** Autumn, **8** Trading Places, **9** Gregory, **11** Cape, **14** Rec, **15** Rider, **16** Lee, **17** Rudd, **18** Gattaca, **21** Wilhelm scream, **23** Hedren, **24** Lance. **DOWN:** **1** Hoth, **2** Béatrice Dalle, **3** Swingers, **4** Ang, **5** Tale, **6** Michael McKean, **7** Estevez, **10** Radha, **12** Mr Brown, **13** Protocol, **19** Fear, **20** Smee, **22** Men. **ANAGRAM** GALACTUS

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 29 July or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Two winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winners' personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

CLASSIC SCENE

THE 'JUST IN TIME' SCENE

Before Sunset

CHOSEN BY
KELLY FREMON CRAIG
(DIRECTOR)

Kelly Fremon Craig: "The last moments of *Before Sunset* when she says, 'Baby, you're gonna miss that plane,' and he says, 'I know...' Such a perfect, delicate way for Linklater to convey what becomes of them. God, I love that film and the beautiful ache it gives me!"

INT. CELINE'S APARTMENT — DAY
Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and Celine (Julie Delpy) have reconnected in Paris, nine years after their first and only meeting in Before Sunrise.

Wandering around Paris for the afternoon, old feelings have been rekindled. With Jesse due to leave for his flight back to the States, they have found themselves in Celine's apartment.

Jesse selects a CD and puts it into the player. He presses play, and as the opening bars of Nina Simone's 'Just In Time' fill the room, he roams around the apartment. Celine watches him look out the window as she makes tea in the kitchen. As Nina sings, "Just in time, you found me just in time," she smiles and brings a mug to him.

CELINE: Did you ever see Nina Simone in concert?

JESSE: No, I never did. Can't believe she's gone.

CELINE: I know, it's so sad.

She gives Jesse his tea.

JESSE: Thanks.

CELINE: It's hot.

He sits down. Celine walks back to the kitchen.

CELINE: I saw her twice. In concert. She was so great. That's one of my favourite songs of hers.

She starts to sing along. She laughs.

CELINE: She was so great. She was so funny in concert too. She would... she would be right in the middle of a song and then, you know, stop and walk from the piano all the way to the edge of the stage. Like, really slowly.

She does an imitation of Nina Simone walking, pursing her lips and sashaying slowly towards Jesse.

CELINE: Then she'd start talking to someone in the audience. "Oh yeah, baby, oh yeah, hmm-hmm, I love you too." (*Celine laughs*) And then she'd move back, took her time, no hurry, you know... She had that big cute ass. She would move — wooo!

They both laugh. Jesse has sunk back into the sofa.

CELINE: And then she would go back to the piano and play some more. And then she would, I don't know, start another song in the middle of another, you know, like… stop again. And be like, "Oh, you over there, can you move that thing? Uh-huh? Ooh, you're cute!"

She laughs. And starts to dance. Jesse watches her.

CELINE: Oh. "Ooh, yeah."

She turns to Jesse and, doing an impression of Nina Simone, says:

CELINE: Baby, you are gonna miss that plane.

JESSE: I know...

Jesse smiles, and for a brief moment his left hand is visible. As is his wedding ring. Then he laughs. We see Celine dance in her kitchen, then fade to black.

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